

JANUARY, 1955

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AMAZING STORIES

VOL. 29 NO. 1



PLAGUE PLANET

by Ivar Jorgensen

Startling NEW Science-Fiction

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THE PSIONIC MOUSETRAP—coming in the big

March issue of—**AMAZING STORIES**



"I don't like the way things are going. We ought to be dead." He thought grimly of what might have been developed below if the Russians had really succeeded in picking Woodbury's brain. He added coldly: "We may be just dropping into a bigger and better mousetrap."

The simile of a better mousetrap was quite inadequate, of course. The science of psionics was bound to make as much difference in human culture—and war—as the discovery of fire or metals. Woodbury, presumably down below, knew more about it than any other man alive. He almost *was* the science of psionics. The Russians might have anything from the controlled delivery of unlimited power from substance, to teleportation and even less guessable things. It depended on what they'd gotten from Woodbury and what they'd done with it.

The other man under the parachute grunted. "Ready."

Gordon said: "Three, two, one—Geronimo!"

A thrilling story of espionage of the future —
Don't miss the March

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*

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*

... or so you say

It has become more and more evident that *Amazing Stories* without a readers' Letter Section just isn't *Amazing Stories*. If memory serves, this was the first science-fiction magazine to have a department where the customer could sound off on the stories, the format, the illustrations, the paper, the editor and his forebears.

With the change in the magazine's size and the reduction in the number of pages, it was decided to eliminate the feature on the theory that readers who bought a fiction publication would want fiction for their money. And so the Letter Section went out the window—and the screams of the boys and girls who liked to take pen in hand were loud and long and articulate. Your editors more or less expected such a reaction, and held to the decision, figuring that time alone would choke off the wails.

It didn't work out that way at all. After all these months without a Readers' Page, the letters of protest continue to pour in. We tried to get our necks off the block by running one page of condensations; this appeased nobody and angered everyone, so we dropped *that* in a hurry. Your editors talked the subject over at length, checked back over the letters received during the past sixty days or so, learned that 324 writers wanted a *long* Readers' Section, 27 would settle for one page, and 51 wanted no such department at *any* length.

What the politicians would call a mandate. We've got to run a nice fat Readers' Section, no matter how we feel about it personally. So—we surrender. If you write letters we'll print them. Unabridged. You gotta gripe? Send it in and it'll be used. You like the stories? Okay, that goes in too. You think Reader Smith is nuts because he called your favorite story a pile of junk? Say so (leaving out the four-letter words) and we'll stick it in. Each letter will be answered right in the column, and don't get sore if the answer is as heated as your own remarks. But if you *do* blow your top—well, we'll print *that* in the next issue. Fair enough?

We'll launch the column just as soon as enough letters come in to warrant it. The number of pages set aside for that purpose will, again, depend on how quick you are to get to your pen, pencil, or typewriter.

HB

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. . . now you don't

BY JAMES LELAND

He was young and intense and absent-minded. She was beautiful and hot-blooded and filled with curiosity. Tie them together, use an incredible invention to light the fuse—and by comparison the hydrogen bomb is a cap gun!

1

ON 138th Street in New York City between Broadway and Riverside Drive stood a three-story faded green frame boarding house. This wooden anachronism was flanked on both sides by huge, coldly impersonal apartment buildings.

It was eight o'clock the morning before Christmas and most of the occupants of the old green boarding house were in the fin de siècle dining room enjoying breakfast. And they were completely unaware of the fact that in a very few moments one of the most important scientific discoveries in mankind's history would be consummated in a little suite of rooms on the third floor.

"Anybody else wants any more," announced Mrs. Bessie Castle, in her good-natured but shrill voice, as she came in from the kitchen with a plate piled with toast, "can make it themselves. I got to get up to the Lyric. We open at 9:30 this here A.M."

"What's playing?" asked Mr. Harold Denny, the owner of this uncommon boarding house. He was a benign, white-haired man of 60 who wrote tedious operas that the Metropolitan consistently and wisely refused to produce.

"Marilyn Monroe and Sunset Carson and who the hell used all the lousy cream, Mrs. Raskolsky?" she finished glaring at a tall, thin woman with tragic hawklike features.

"How can anyone be so stu-



Under the fine spray the cat slowly disappeared!

pid as to see movies when they can listen to good music?" replied the thin woman turning up the volume on the portable radio in her lap. The ominously frightening "Battle on the Ice" from ALEXANDER NEVSKY roared out.

"How can anyone eat with that nightmare in a tin factory blasting?" retorted the usually happy tempered Mrs. Castle shaking her dyed red hair belligerently.

"It's Prokovief, Mrs. Castle," soothed the conciliatory Mr. Denny. "But it isn't very breakfasty," he noted with a smile towards his Russian tenant. "Why don't you try WNYC? Personally I prefer Mozart for breakfast."

"We're all out of coffee," announced a pretty green-eyed blonde girl with a page-boy bob as she entered with a large, steaming, tin coffee pot. "Somebody get five pounds for over Christmas."

"It's the Raskolsky's turn," said Mrs. Castle.

"Didn't we get it the last time?"

"The last you got coffee it was 25 cents a pound and you had to grind it yourself," replied the dyed redhead.

An old man, seedily distinguished, who looked like King George V after two months

in steerage, jumped up from his seat and took the heavy pot from the girl. "You shouldn't be carrying heavy things, Dolly. You know what the doctor told you."

"Thanks, Mr. Valentine." The girl sat down. "But I feel fine today."

"The heart is a funny thing," propounded Mr. Denny gesturing with a piece of toast. "One day fine and the next day phhhht! Dr. Mannix told me you had a bad . . . lesion I think he called it . . ."

"What the devil is a lesion?" asked Mrs. Castle.

A muffled explosion put an end to the discussion.

"Dr. Vickers is up," said Mr. Denny unnecessarily.

"Some day he's going to blow this joint to bits," said Dolly. "What a creepo!"

"I think he's a nice young man," said Mrs. Castle. "He almost spoke to me yesterday when I changed his sheets."

"Nicholas says it's against the law to make dangerous experiments in a boarding house like he does," put in Mrs. Raskolsky. "Nicholas says . . ."

"Nicholas . . . schmicholas," growled Mrs. Castle turning off the heat in the front radiator with a defiant gesture.

"It's hot enough in here to grow kumquats."

"Ladies . . . ladies, no personalities!" interposed the gentle Denny.

"Anyone got two dimes for a nickel?" shouted a tall, thin man in a worn overcoat as he burst in desperately from one of the two basement apartments.

"That's the best proposition I've had since I quit LOVELY LADY," remarked Dolly holding out two dimes for the intellectual looking Mr. Raskolsky who grabbed the money and flew out the front door.

Mrs. Raskolsky, shaking her head dubiously, got up from the table and went to the basement steps. As she did she belligerently turned on the radiator. "Sensitive people *feel* the cold!"

"Anyone seen Charlu this morning?" asked Denny.

No one replied. After a minute Mr. Valentine noted, "Professor Vickers took him upstairs last night about midnight."

"If he's experimenting on that cat, I'm gonna call the SPCA!" cried Dolly.

"Now, now," soothed Mr. Denny. "I'm sure Dr. Vickers wouldn't . . ."

"But Vickers hates cats. He throws empty acid bottles at

the boys on the back fence," said Dolly. "So why should Doc Frankenstein take Charlu upstairs unless he was going to do something awful to him? I tell you I don't trust that goop!"

"I was right," said Mrs. Raskolsky matter-of-factly as she came up with a pair of trousers. "Again Nicholas has forgotten them. Yesterday I gave him a letter to mail and his subway fare so he put the dime in the mail box."

Mrs. Castle laughed. "Last week I gave old Nick the garbage to put out front and I hear he took it all the way to his office."

"He has things on his mind," resentfully replied Mrs. Raskolsky.

The front door opened and Raskolsky dashed in. Without a word he took the pants from his wife and, sublimely unconscious of his audience, put them on without taking off his overcoat.

"Mr. Raskolsky," said Denny to put the Russian at his ease, "I just finished reading that book you gave me, THE IDIOT. Very interesting."

"I didn't know you wrote the story of your life," remarked Mrs. Castle good-naturedly.

"A beautiful writer," said

Raskolsky zippering himself. "Dostoevski tells the whole truth."

"Nuts!" grunted Mrs. Castle. "Read something good like THE DAILY NEWS, Nicky boy, and then maybe you won't forget your pants every other morning."

Dolly, who was sprinkling fish food in the large ugly bowl on the mantel, suddenly screamed with delight, "I had at least a dozen babies last night!"

The front doorbell rang tiredly. But before anyone could answer it a big ruddy-faced patrolman pushed open the door. He was half carrying a heavy, limp man with an unhealthy, putty face.

"The day has officially begun," said Mrs. Castle. "Putlitz is home."

"Hi, everyone," said Officer Grennan. "Has Putty got a load on today! Come on, boy, take it easy. There!" He maneuvered Putlitz into an easy chair with exposed springs. The putty-faced middle-aged man sat, half conscious, with his overcoat hunched around him. "I got 'nother t-t-ticket," he stammered waving a parking ticket. "Every m-m-morning I get up at th-three to move my car so's I don't get a t-t-ticket. An' I keep getting

t-t-tickets. What k-k-kind of a l-life is that?"

"The Battle of the Century," laughed Dolly helping the big man out of his filthy overcoat. "Putlitz versus the City of New York."

There was a loud cat shriek from one of the upstairs rooms.

"Charlu!" cried Denny getting to his feet.

"What's going on?" asked Grennan automatically pulling out his book of tickets.

"Oh, nothing," said Denny escorting the policeman to the door. "Thanks for bringing Putty home. Come on in tomorrow for some egg-nog."

The cat howled in protest again.

"What's wrong with that mangy cat now?" queried the policeman.

"Going to have kittens," explained Mrs. Castle, inwardly smiling at the thought of the male Charlu in labor. "Better get the lead out, Grennan. Maybe you can grab some old lady and fine her for not having no top on her garbage can. Get out there and protect us citizens."

"Aw, now that wasn't my fault," protested the big policeman. "I got orders to crack down on . . ."

"Forget it, Mr. Grennan, we understand," said Denny

half pushing the policeman towards the front door.

"Nuts, it's that Stinky Hennessy, the contractor, who wants to tear down this shack and put up an apartment. He's the one sicking you cops on us!" accused Mrs. Castle.

"Ah, you got more lip than my old lady herself," muttered the policeman as the door closed on his back.

"That butcher Vickers is doing something gruesome to Charlu!" cried Dolly starting for the hallway.

"Now, now, let's keep our voices down," whispered Denny. "We don't want Grennan . . ."

There was another howl and then a stamping of feet.

"Come back here! Come back!" shouted a male voice from the third floor impatiently. And then the same voice became wheedling, "Here, nice kitty."

"What's going on up there?" called Dolly.

There was no answer for a moment and then a well-modulated, educated voice replied, "Nothing."

The owner of the voice came rapidly down the last flight of stairs. Macready Vickers was a small, wiry man of 35 with an air of pre-occupation about him. He

would have been good looking if he'd been interested enough to comb his wavy but gnarled hair and wear decent clothes. He had on a pair of filthy, torn slacks and a sweat shirt so covered with stains it was difficult to see what its basic color had been.

"How about some breakfast, professor?" called Mrs. Castle from the dining room.

"Breakfast?" Vickers spoke the word as though it had just been invented. "Uh," he added, "I thought I had breakfast already."

"That was yesterday," Denny gently informed him. "Say, was that Charlu we heard howling?"

"Charlu?"

"The cat."

"Odd name for a cat."

"Dolly named him after the Baron in REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST," said Denny. "He's gay you know."

"A real scamp," added Dolly.

"Proust?" asked the puzzled chemist.

"No, Charlu . . . the cat," patiently explained Denny.

"There's quite a colony of them around Hamilton Heights," informed Mrs. Castle brightly. She had an encyclopedic knowledge of the love-life of every living creature on the block. "I think it's

the mad city pace," she added sympathetically.

"I . . . I was trying to feed him, that's all," said the small man looking around furtively.

"Don't you have chemistry classes this morning, Dr. Vickers?" asked Mrs. Raskolsky who was now ensconced in the most comfortable chair in the front room with her everpresent radio and favorite book.

"Not this morning."

"I thought Columbia was in session today," replied Mrs. Raskolsky looking up from THE HOUSE OF THE DEAD. "My cousin Alvin . . ."

"I am no longer associated with Columbia," replied the professor whose mind was on something else. "There's no way to get out, is there?"

"Out of what?" asked Denny.

"The cat. Out of the house. Proust, I mean."

"Gertrude Stein must write this guy's dialogue," muttered Dolly to Mr. Valentine. "The cat's name is Charlu," she said turning to Vickers.

"Charlu?" Vickers felt under the old sofa. "Isn't that the Baron in REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST? Odd name for a cat. Very unusual."

"We were thinking of call-

ing him Sport," said Dolly sarcastically.

"Would have been appropriate," replied the still searching professor whose quixotic mind suddenly remembered all about the cat. "An abnormal cat is, in a manner of speaking, a mutant-type. Sport. Good."

A sudden feline hiss could be heard as Vickers prodded behind a chair. A vase was knocked over and there was a scampering of tiny, terrified feet.

"Kitty! Come here!" Vickers wheeled and ran up the stairs. Only a very quick eye would have seen the disembodied tip of a cat's tail preceding the professor.

"That guy has blown a fuse," said Dolly. "I didn't see any cat. Did any of you?"

"Not me," agreed Denny. "But I thought I heard a cat . . ."

"I'm going upstairs and see what's what," said the girl with determination. "I wouldn't trust that obnoxious character as far . . ." The girl quickly followed the professor.

"She certainly dislikes Dr. Vickers," commented Denny sadly.

"Hah!" grunted the observant Mrs. Castle who had learned about life at the

Lyric. "She's nuts about the guy. She's just mad he don't pay any attention to her."

2

VICKERS' door on the third floor was locked by the time Dolly got there.

"Who is it?"

"Me . . . Dolly."

"I don't need anything."

"I want to talk to you."

There was a pause and then the door opened a few inches. "I beg your pardon." Vickers stuck a puzzled but annoyed head in the doorway. "My sheets are clean."

"Well, bully for you!"

"You aren't the one who changes the sheets?"

"Mrs. Castle changes the sheets. She is 55," added Dolly sarcastically. "Or hadn't you noticed?"

Dolly pushed the door open. "I don't get to the third floor often so I think I may as well see your place." She looked around the chaotic bedroom and into the front room.

"I'm afraid you don't understand, Miss. I'm extremely busy."

"Okay, I give up," said the girl. "Where is he?"

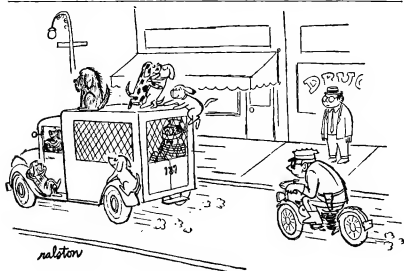
"Where is who?"

"Charlu."

"Oh, you mean the cat!"

Dolly walked through the bedroom and into the front study.

"Please! You can't go in



there!" shouted the professor in an agitated voice.

"Here, Charlu! Here, boy! Help has come. Succor has arrived! Come on out, you stupid jerk!"

Vickers, who had closed the door as soon as Dolly entered, followed the girl into the front room. "What right have you got invading my privacy? This is ridiculous!"

"You have our cat!" accused the girl angrily.

"My dear girl!"

"I am no one's dear girl." She wrinkled her nose in disgust, as she neared the large gas stove. "My God, what're you cooking? Eye of newt and toe of frog?"

"MACBETH, Scene One, Act One," said the professor automatically. "If you don't leave my room at once . . ."

"You'll scream?"

"I shall call the landlord!"

"I represent the landlord. We want Charlu!"

"Who?"

"Not you, you pugnosed . . ."

"I don't have your cat!"

"Meowwww!" dissented a third voice.

"And what's that, One Man's Familiar?" asked the girl.

"I heard nothing."

"Meow."

"It's your imagination," insisted the professor.

"Well, something imaginary is rubbing my legs and it's either the cat or you."

"I assure you, young lady, it is not I!" he said indignantly.

She stooped to pick up the cat. "Where is he?" she gasped. "I feel him but I don't see . . ."

Then she saw the tip of a tail waving at her.

"Oh, my God!" she cried.

"You've got to get out of here!" Vickers seized the almost fainting girl and tried to lead her out of the room.

"But I saw . . ."

About a foot from the tip of the tail, cat's whiskers appeared and finally, like Alice's Cheshire in reverse, the rather dissolute face of Charlu became visible.

Dolly dropped into an easy chair. A less hardy individual would have fainted but Dolly had worked nine months at LEON AND EDDIES' and had seen almost everything.

"You little beast!" growled Vickers picking up the visible tail and head of Charlu. "Now, look what you've done!" As if in answer, the body of the cat faded slowly into sight like a 1919 D. W. Griffiths' shot of Lillian Gish. "Invisibility lasted only 27

minutes," muttered the professor to himself. "D-27-3 obviously needs longer radium treatment."

"W . . . w . . . w . . . what . . ." was the incoherent question from the girl.

"It's perfectly obvious," said Vickers disgustedly. "Now you know about my '4-D' Paint."

"Four-D Paint?"

"Fourth Dimensional Paint. It makes things invisible. The scientific name shall be Tincture of . . ." Vickers walked to a pot bubbling on the stove. He smelled its noxious fumes, nodded in satisfaction and then added a pinch from a little can. "D-27-4 should be much more potent."

"No . . . no . . . no . . ." Dolly shook her head dazedly. "There's no such thing as . . ."

"My dear young woman," snapped Vickers, "now that you have smashed your way into my laboratory, the least you can do is show common sense. I just stated that I have invented a paint to make objects and creatures invisible. It is quite annoying to have you bleat, 'No, no!' at me."

"You're wrong," said the girl in a quavering voice. "I said no, no, no. And I'd like to add another no. It's impossible."

"In the world of science,

nothing is impossible," was the curt reply. He sat down on a crude work bench and sighed. "Now, I suppose you will go around broadcasting about my paint."

"But it's . . ." Dolly looked around the fantastically cluttered room. "It's such an unbelievable thing! I can't . . ."

Vickers sighed. "When that ingenious caveman brought the first wheel home after a hard day's work I imagine he got the same reaction from his mate. Human nature hasn't changed much."

"You're nuttier than Mr. Peanut, brother." The girl got to her feet. "I think I've been doped somehow. Four-D Paint! Phooey!!"

The professor picked up a spray gun and squirted paint on Charlu. There was an indignant screech from the cat who disappeared with the exception of his tail. "I always miss that tail," grumbled Vickers. "Now, to coin a phrase, not seeing should be believing." He pointed the spray gun at the girl. "Or would you prefer a more personal experiment?"

"Oh, my God!" The girl sank back in the chair. "I believe!"

"I had to show you I wasn't a charlatan, Miss," he said.

"Otherwise you might have spoiled everything. I must ask you to exercise the utmost secrecy. If this paint got into the wrong hands the world might be plunged into war tomorrow."

"Well, wh . . . wh . . . wh . . ."

Vickers intense eyes bored into the girl. "Do you promise?"

"Well, I guess . . ."

"You've got to be more specific! The fate of mankind may be in your hands!"

"Aren't you being a little melo-dramatic?"

"You fool! Can't you see what would happen if ships and planes were painted with my '4-D' Paint? And invisible saboteurs could wreck the world!"

"Well, then why the heck did you invent the darn stuff in the first place?"

A smile which made Vickers seem very young crept onto his face "Ever since I read Wells' INVISIBLE MAN I wanted to know if invisibility was possible. For fifteen years I've been experimenting but it wasn't until this morning when I at last made the cat disappear that I finally realized what terrible things might be done with my paint."

"That's pretty stupid."

Vickers, ignoring her remark, looked into her eyes closely. "Are you the dancer Mr. Denny says has heart disease?"

"Ex-dancer."

Vickers shook his head dogmatically. "You haven't."

"Who are you?" asked the indignant girl acting as if she had just been mugged. "Dr. Alexis Q. Carrel?"

"You haven't anything wrong with your heart."

"You have X-ray eyes or something? My doctor says . . . Hey, what do you know about heart disease anyway?"

Vickers' smile was almost unbearably annoying to the girl. "You fight for your disease tenaciously, Miss. I think . . ."

A distant but shrill female voice could be heard screaming.

"Mrs. Castle!" cried the girl recognizing the tocsin. "Something must have happened downstairs!" She sprang from the chair and ran out the door.

"Heart disease!" scoffed Vickers following her.

The front room downstairs was the scene of a riot when Dolly, chased by the professor, got there.

"FASCISTS!" screamed Mrs. Castle in a voice that would have inspired any red-

blooded lexicographer to improve on the word 'fishwife.' "What right you got wrecking happy homes?"

"But madame," mumbled a tall, cadaverous man who looked like John Carradine after a month's fast. "The City of New York merely doing its . . ."

"City schmitty! I been voting All-Stars for twenty-five years and I got some rights! Tammany is going to hear . . ."

"But can't you give me a little time?" interposed the ashen-faced Denny.

"Communists!" suddenly hissed Mrs. Raskolsky from her easy chair in the corner. She turned up her radio and out came THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR.

"Can't you people understand our position?" desperately said the short fat man who was the tall one's companion. "We're only inspectors. We got a job to do and . . ."

"It's a graft!" screeched Mrs. Castle. "Hennessy the Contractor has got to you. He wants to tear down this house and put up another gory apartment building!"

"My dear madame," intoned the quasi John Carradine with a ghastly smile.

"The only Hennessy I know is Three Star."

"Ho, ho, ho," growled Mrs. Castle. "You should tell jokes on WNYC on the City Garbage Comedy Hour. Hennessy's got to your whole department."

"Can't we talk this over reasonably?" pleaded the despairing Denny. "Please, Mrs. Raskolsky, less volume."

"What's up?" asked Dolly.

"These two OGPUs," accused Mrs. Raskolsky turning THE MERRY WIVES down to a more reasonable roar, "have condemned this house. It's going to be torn down in 48 hours."

"The City says the house is a menace," protested Denny. "I'm sure if I could reason with the Commissioner . . ."

"There's nothing wrong with this house," cried Mrs. Castle. "EXCEPT THAT GODDAMED MUSIC!!!" she screeched at Mrs. Raskolsky who was so surprised she turned off the radio completely. "The only menace is Stinky Hennessy. We called him Stinky forty years ago at old P.S. 113 and he's still in there stinking!"

The cadaverous official cleared his throat. "May I read you the list of complaints? Quote. Sidewalk made of slate slabs, out of

line and bumpy. Furnace and chimney faulty causing noxious fumes. Frame of structure out of plumb by 18 degrees. Has not been painted since 1918 and is considered eyesore by neighborhood. Unquote."

The entire household broke out in protest.

"This structure is hereby condemned!" shouted the thin man above the tumult. "And the occupants of this house are given notice to vacate immediately. The City wreckers will be here the day after tomorrow. Good day and a Merry Christmas! Come, Herbert," he said to his fat companion. Then the two harried officials escaped.

"Well," sighed Denny after a sad pause, "I'm sorry but you folks will have to move out."

"Nuts!" cried the embattled Mrs. Castle. "They can't do this to an Irishman!"

"I'm afraid there's nothing we can do, Mrs. Castle," said Denny.

"I got connections." She ran to the telephone and dialed a number.

At that moment the front doorbell rang and Dolly let in a small, dapper, distinguished man of 55. He was very suave and continental.

"How do you do?" he

greeted the roomful of people. "I see by your sign outside you have a two-room apartment for rent." Either George Arliss had copied the way he talked or he had copied it from George. He put down the suitcase and a violin case he was painfully carrying.

"I'm sorry," started Mr. Denny, "But . . ."

"James J. Flynn!" shouted Mrs. Castle. "Yeah. I wanta speak to James J. Flynn. Well, look in the pool room then, dummy!"

"I am Issac Krumbein. I was formerly with the Philadelphia Philharmonic. Now I have a string quartet."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Krumbein, but I . . ."

"Hi, Jim? This is Bessie! Bessie. How many Bessies you know? Bessie Castle. Yeah. Say the lousiest thing happened. You remember old Stinky Hennessy? The one used to beat the beejasus outta you . . ."

"Just what we need is a string quartet," said Dolly.

"I don't have children or pets. Just a sister-in-law. She's outside feeding the birds. Today my quartet is auditioning for Mrs. Rensselaer Schuyler."

"But . . ." protested Denny.

"The Mrs. Rensellaer Schuyler."

"I know her," said Mr. Valentine wiping the egg from his stained necktie.

"She's going to be my patroness. She's arranging a series of concerts in Westchester homes..."

"She had me arrested for making a nuisance in her front yard," said the vindictive Valentine.

"That's right, Jim. Condemned. Who was it signed by? Gee, I'll ask, Hey!" shouted Mrs. Castle to the others. "Who signed that condemn notice?"

"It was pitch dark and I was desperate," explained Valentine looking accusingly at Krumbein. "Rich people have no understanding of basic human dignity."

"They're the only kind of people who'll support chamber music," apologized the musician.

"Chamber music, that's a good name for it," said Dolly. "The name was Doremus, Mrs. Castle."

"Doremus!" shouted the latter into the phone. "DOREMUS! You know, like in dore-me. Yeah. You can? Wonderful! Oh, Jim, boy, you're a living doll!" She slammed the receiver down and turned to the others tri-

umphantly. "Tammany!" she uttered reverently. "Well, kids, it's all fixed."

"You mean we're not condemned now?" Denny's eyes were bright with hope.

"That's right. Jim Flynn is getting the notice quashed."

"Oh, Mrs. Castle, you're wonderful!" Dolly kissed her.

"Very nice," noted Mrs. Raskolsky surreptitiously turning on another radiator.

"Only one thing," said the dyed redhead.

"What's that?" asked Denny anxiously.

"Jim says we got to fix the stuff mentioned in the complaint. You know, the sidewalk and stuff."

"But I don't have enough money for that and taxes too," groaned Denny.

Everyone groaned in sympathy.

"Is money the only problem?" asked the until-then silent Vickers. All turned to him. "Because if it is, I can easily get the money for you."

"Oh, Dr. Vickers!" cried Dolly. The professor, thinking she was going to kiss him, backed away.

"But it'll cost all of \$2,500," said Denny. "That's the lowest estimate."

"I'll have it for you tonight," said the professor calmly.

"Oh, Dr. Vickers, I always did say you were a gentleman in every sense of the word!" gushed Mrs. Castle.

"If you like I'll recite THE DEATH OF MOSES for everyone," volunteered Mr. Valentine stepping forward eagerly.

"Save it for the Christmas party tonight, Mr. Valentine," said the joyous Denny. "Now I can go back and work on my new opera with a free heart!" He held out his hand to the professor. "I'm going to dedicate it to you. It's called ACROSS THE ICE. It's about George Washington, you know."

"I must go and finish my experiment," said the professor starting upstairs. "Has anyone seen the cat?"

"Charlu?" queried Denny. "I haven't seen him since..."

"Charlu?" Vickers looked blank.

"That's the cat's name," explained Dolly patiently.

"Funny name for a cat," he remarked running up the stairs two at a time. "Odd."

"Is the apartment available?" asked the patient Krumbein.

"Available?" Denny looked at the violin case. "You're a musician." He looked around at the others who all nodded

affirmatively. "Yes, Mr. Krumbein. Welcome to 620. You're now a member of our happy family."

"By the way . . . the money situation . . ." said the violinist with embarrassment. "At the present moment I am temporarily . . ."

"For an awful moment I thought he could pay the rent," noted Dolly to Mrs. Raskolsky. "But he's one of us."

"Not now," said Denny waving his hand vaguely. "Don't let's talk about money now."

"What grand people!" cried Krumbein. "Now I want you to meet my sister-in-law, Nora Doyle." He opened the front door and called, "Nora! We've got it!"

A woman almost six feet tall wearing a colorful turban entered. She had draped over her shoulders a worn leopard coat. A hungry pigeon sat on the palm of her right hand eating crumbs. But the thing that struck one first, oddly enough, were her burning black eyes.

"Who wants the first reading?" she asked looking at the occupants of the house. She put the pigeon on her shoulder and then unrolled a large chart of a gaudily colored cranium. "This man has an

interesting head," she remarked gleefully maneuvering Mr. Valentine into a corner.

"Nora, these are our good neighbors. Let's not read heads until after lunch, dear," said the nervous Krumbein. "Come upstairs to our apartment, my dear, and rest awhile."

The big woman docilely followed the little man up the stairs. She turned after several steps. "I'm very good with palms too," she informed them in a loud stage whisper as she smiled wildly.

Mrs. Castle turned to Denny and shook her head admiringly. "Mr. Denny I don't know how you do it. You just got a knack getting the right kind of people in here."

"I think they'll both be very interesting," agreed Mr. Denny contentedly. Dolly suddenly started up the stairs. "You've got to watch yourself, Dolly. Dr. Mannix said you weren't to go up the stairs more than twice a day."

"I've got to see the professor," she said running up the stairs. "Your rooms are the two back ones on the second floor," she called to Krumbein who had wandered into the community bathroom.

"Thank you," said the musician in as urbane a manner

as one could with a pigeon sitting on top of one's head.

Vickers' door was locked as usual.

"Hey, let me in!" she called. "It's Dolly!"

The door opened after a pause and the professor's impatient face glared at her. "I don't need a thing. My sheets are . . ."

"Clean. I know." She pushed her way into the room. "I just wanted to tell you," she said looking at him with soft eyes, "that I think you're grand giving all that money to Mr. Denny. This house means a lot to all of us."

"It was nothing," he said impatiently.

"It was wonderful! I want to apologize for thinking you were a selfish jerk."

"My dear young woman, I did not offer the money in the spirit of charity or goodwill."

"You didn't?"

"I simply cannot have my equipment moved at this point or my experiments will be ruined."

"I apologize again. You are a selfish jerk. Sorry to have misjudged you." She put her hand on the doorknob and then turned to face him again. "Where in the heck are you going to get the money?"

Are you borrowing on your salary at Columbia?"

"I thought I told you I was no longer associated with Columbia."

"You've been canned?" she gasped incredulously.

"Discharged yesterday. I missed seven classes last week and the Dean took a dim view of the whole situation. Actually it has been a stroke of luck. Now I can spend all my time on perfecting the paint."

"But where are you going to get the money for Mr. Denny?"

"Very simple," explained the erstwhile professor. "I'm going to get it at the bank this morning."

"You mean you're going to take out all your savings!"

"Savings? I haven't had money in the bank since I joined a Christmas Club in 1927." He pointed at a bulky lead box. "There are my life's savings . . . radium."

"But you were just saying you were going to get money from the . . ."

"Why do you keep repeating things? Now please stop gossiping and help me get ready."

"Get ready?"

The professor picked up the spray gun and started painting himself. "You'll have to do my back."

"You mean you're going to . . ."

"For a bright looking young lady sometimes you're very dull. I'm going to make myself invisible, quite obviously, and then take a trip to the Corn Exchange Bank. The one on Fifth Avenue has the nicest atmosphere." He handed her the spray gun. "Be sure you get under my arms."

3

A FEW minutes later, Vickers was invisible except for his left hand.

"We've used up all of D-27-3," he said, his visible hand moving weirdly towards the pot on the stove. A small brush rose from the table, dipped into the pot and then painted out the floating hand. "Now I'm all set."

"You mean *we*," said the girl. "I'm going with you."

"You may be helpful. You may accompany me," consented the unseen professor. "Wait for me downstairs. I want to mix up another lot of D-27-4 just in case."

Dolly, humming gaily, lightly tripped down the stairs. As she reached the first floor landing, there was a clatter of feet from the basement apartment of Mrs. Castle. Putlitz, clad only in

an ancient, tattered bathrobe he had stolen from Bellevue on one of his periodic vacations to that institution, scrambled past Dolly and, panting wheezily, hid behind the girl.

"You lousy squarehead!" Mrs. Castle, waving a yard stick, appeared at the head of the basement stairs in her worn rabbit coat. "Taking a shower in my shower! If I ever catch you in there again, you big drunk, I'll wrap a crowbar over your head!" She turned to Denny who came in from the dining room with a sheaf of papers. "Almost scared mother outta her wig when she went into the can and found this creep in there."

"There's a centipedes in the t-t-tub upstairs," explained Putlitz. "I'll be d-damned if I'll t-t-take a bath where there's centipedes. They get in your ears and eat your b-brains out!"

"You got nothing to worry about then," said Mrs. Castle calmly.

"Anyhow there wasn't any hot w-water upstairs," added the putty-faced man looking reproachfully at the oblivious Mrs. Raskolsky. "She h-heats up their apartment by turning on the h-hot water every m-morning and we never have

any on our s-side of the house."

"I'm sure we can work this out, folks," soothed Denny. "Say, Putty, don't forget you said you'd get the Christmas tree."

"That's why I'm getting cleaned. I can get it ch-cheaper in the B-B-Bronx." The big man scrambled up the stairs.

"Well, I gotta get to the dear old Lyric," said Mrs. Castle smiling as though nothing extraordinary had happened.

"Who sees movies in the morning?" asked Dolly.

"Oh, bums and discouraged salesmen, kids playing hooky and floozies. If you want to learn about life just sit in my booth one day." She buttoned her worn rabbit coat. "Well, tata, kids. As they say in Africa, Abyssinia."

"Well, so long," said Dolly. "See you to . . ." The girl was suddenly propelled, as if by a cyclone, out the front door past the amazed Mrs. Castle. "That was a silly darn thing to do," she grumbled a moment later on the steep climb up towards Broadway."

"No time to lose," said the unseen Vickers. "Let's hurry. I'm chilly."

"My gosh, you didn't have a coat on when we sprayed you! Let's go back and . . ."

"Cold is a state of mind. Hurry!"

In a few minutes they had entered the downtown side of the subway at 137th Street. Dolly put her coin in the slot and pushed the turnstile. She felt pressure on her right arm.

"Always did resent paying this fare," whispered Vickers.

It wasn't until their train got to 125th Street that Dolly saw their first mistake. The only other passenger near them, a young messenger boy with a dozen packages, was looking at the empty space on her left with a horrified expression on his face. Dolly turned and looked at the invisible Vickers. Two large, bright blue eyes were hung in the air like tiny balloons. Vickers had closed his eyes during the spraying, she realized.

"Did you see what I saw?" quavered the fifteen-year-old boy.

"See what?" asked the girl.

"Them eyes! Floating there!" He pointed at empty space.

"Little boys shouldn't smoke marijuana," scolded the girl.

"But I tell you I seen . . ."

"Little boys should be in

school learning grammar and not trying to pick up big girls. Your time will come. Be patient."

"But it was right there!"

"One more peep out of you, Buster Brown, and I'll have the guard take your yoyo away from you!"

When the train stopped at Columbia, the messenger boy, with a last suspicious look, got off the train.

A heavy set sensuous-lipped man in a camel's hair coat sauntered possessively into the car and, after an approving look at the girl, walked towards her. "This seat taken?" he asked with elaborate politeness, preparing to sit next to the girl.

"I have a communicable disease," cried the frightened girl who wondered what would happen when the big man sat down in an invisible lap.

"So?" replied the Upper Broadway wolf leering. "I like to live dangerously." He sat down on the left of the girl. When nothing happened the girl blinked her eyes. "The name is Frendly. And that's what I am. Just real Frendly." He laughed at his own humor and then suddenly cried out in pain. "Who kicked my shin?"

"My alter ego," said the

girl who had caught a glimpse of the unpainted shoe sole of the professor.

"Alter whogo?"

"Horatio Hugo. He's Victor's other brother."

"Say, who you kidding?" The big man moved closer to the girl. A discarded DAILY NEWS rose from the floor and slapped the big man sharply in the face. The man angrily brushed the paper away. "You one of these rugged Roller Derby babes? Getting tough, huh?" As he made a lunge for the girl, two angry blue eyes glared a foot from the man's nose. The big man screamed in terror and ran down the aisle and into the next car.

"We'd better get out fast," whispered the girl. "Give me your hand and for gosh sake's close your eyes or you'll cause a riot."

The two got off at the 110th Street station and waited for the next train. Twenty minutes later they were walking crosstown towards Fifth Avenue.

"Not so fast," protested Vickers who had difficulty walking with his eyes closed.

A passing woman, hearing the masculine voice, looked at Dolly with amazement.

"My name is Christine," ex-

plained the girl in a deep voice.

"Christine?" asked the unseen Vickers. "What's that got to . . ."

"I'm also a ventriloquist," hurriedly shouted Dolly at the gaping woman. "Shut up!" she whispered to her companion.

No one else noticed anything peculiar about the passing girl on the trip to the Corn Exchange Bank with the exception of an old Collie-poodle-terrier who bumped into the invisible Vickers and then kept sniffing, in wonderment, the strange object which could be touched but not seen.

Fortunately the alert guard at the door of the bank excluded the following dog with a practiced kick.

The interior of the bank was friendly in a tomblake fashion. Efficient tellers were handling the few day-before-Christmas customers.

"Could I help you, miss?" asked a uniformed guard pleasantly.

"Uh . . I . . ah . . wanted to get some change," she finally mumbled.

"Over there," said the guard pointing discreetly. "Our Mr. Maloney will take care of you."

As she approached a low

wooden railing there was a flapping of papers on the top of one of the desks behind the barrier and an inkwell was mysteriously spilled.

"Clumsy!" she whispered to the unseen Vickers who had evidently vaulted over the railing. She walked up to Mr. Maloney's window.

"Good morning," he said jovially.

"Could I have some new quarters?" she asked handing the teller her last five dollars. Two large blue eyes peered over the teller's back.

"Why certainly."

A large sheaf of twenty dollar bills slowly rose from one of the teller's pigeonholes.

"Can you make that dimes instead?" she shouted to distract the teller.

"Dimes?" The sheaf of bills which had stopped in midair instantly disappeared. And a second later the two floating eyes moved away.

The girl sighed with relief. Macready had obviously hidden the bills under his invisible coat. "Roosevelt dimes," she added too gaily. "My whole family is Democratic." Then she remembered he didn't have a coat. He was wearing slacks and a filthy sweatshirt.

While she was wondering and worrying, she felt a nudge at her right elbow. "Let's go,"

whispered a familiar voice calmly.

"Oh . . . oh, yes . . ." The girl nervously started for the door.

"Miss!" called Mr. Maloney.

"Merry Christmas!" answered the retreating girl, pulling at her blind companion.

"Come back, miss!" called the teller as discreetly as possible in a louder voice.

"And a Happy New Year!"

She was almost at the exit.

"Guard, get that girl for me!" instructed Mr. Maloney as the girl ran out the bank.

"Oh, never mind." He sighed. "She forgot her dimes."

"What are you so nervous about?" asked the invisible voice when they reached the street. "There's nothing . . ."

The girl gasped, for Vickers' head, his eyes benignly closed, popped into sight.

A fat woman, carrying gaily colored Christmas packages, screamed, throwing her presents into the air.

A dirty sweatshirt and old gray slacks next came into view. This time two men and four jabbering stenographers responded with assorted gasps and moans. There was an aged, but still vigorous bark, and before Vickers could open his eyes his right leg was at-

tacked by the ancient Collie-poodle-terrier who had been lolling outside the bank with an eye out for just such a return engagement. His triumphant growls as he tore the leg of the slacks to bits seem to say, "You can't bite 'em if you can't see 'em!"

A large package of bills fell to the sidewalk and the old dog, who evidently knew a good thing when he saw it, forgot Vickers' slacks and picked up the money. As though he had been waiting for this chance all his life, the old city dog streaked for the entrance of the bank. This time the guard let him enter.

4

FORTY-FIVE minutes later, two badly shaken, but otherwise intact people were sitting at the well-polished bar of TOOMEY'S SHAMROCK BAR, Ladies Invited.

"My usual, Tommy," called Dolly to the skinny bartender. "This is the only place in New York I can get half a glass of beer."

"W . . w . . why a half a glass?" asked the still shivering Vickers, whose face was slightly blue from the cold.

"Dr. Mannix told me I couldn't have even a glass of

beer. But, after all, a half a glass isn't a glass, is it?"

"The amount of stimulating beverages that you consume is relatively unimportant, Miss Ah . . . How odd! I don't believe I even know your last name."

"Bush is the name. And that's the way I feel right now. But call me Dolly. After what we've been through today we can skip the formality, eh, Mac?"

"Mac?"

"Your first name is Mac-ready, isn't it?"

The professor pulled a pair of horn-rimmed glasses out of his right hip pocket and put them on. "No one ever called me Mac before."

"That speaks volumes for your background, Mac. What'll you drink now that you're safely hidden behind the cheaters?"

"Drink? Oh . . . water please."

"Water after what we've . . ."

"I have never found it necessary to indulge myself with alcohol in any form."

"You never had a drink in your life?" she asked incredulously.

"Here you are, Dolly." Tommy Toomey placed a half filled glass of beer in front of her. "The smallest head in

captivity. Happy Holidays, kiddo."

"This bird has never had a drink in his life."

"You're," started the offended Tommy, "a subversive son of a . . ."

"Biologist," finished Vickers.

"Huh? Come again?"

"My father was Vincent Vickers." He turned to the girl proudly. "He was quite well known in biology circles."

"What kind of characters you bring in the SHAMROCK, Dolly? He a goof ball eater?"

"He's a professor," informed Dolly with a wink. "He can make things disappear."

"Oh." The bartender smiled and held out his hand. "Mitt me, Vick." He shook hands with the confused Vickers. "My old man's second cousin was a pickpocket too. He only made one mistake. He picked a plain clothed dick's pocket."

"I assure you. . . ." cut in the professor.

"Give the lad a Tom Collins," said the girl. "If you can trust me till Monday, Tommy. Mrs. Schultz said she'd pay me for Hulda's dress then. I'm a dressmaker now," she explained to the puzzled Vickers.

"You hurt me feelings, Dolly." The bartender frown-

ed as he expertly mixed the drink. "Us old buddies from Club Sixteen don't ask for no credit from each other. The drinks is on me." He handed Vickers the tall drink. "That's a real cool sweatshirt you got there, bud. Who's your tailor?"

"What is this?" asked the professor.

"It's a Tom Collins," explained the girl. "Practically a lemonade."

Vickers tasted the drink and smiled. "Very refreshing."

"Dolly here was in the chorus line at Club Sixteen when I was at the bar," explained the garrulous Tommy. "Prettiest legs in show biz, I always said. Too bad you . . ." He coughed and then moved down the bar to another customer.

"I just got a new cardiograph. I'm supposed to take it to Dr. Mannix Monday. Maybe you'd like to see it?" asked the girl.

"If you want." The professor had finished his drink. "Another one of these for me, please, sir," he called to Tommy.

"Huh?"

"Would you give me another one of these . . . ah . . . Thomas Collinses?"

"One of these Thomas

Collinses," repeated the delighted Tommy. "This yunk is a real find, Dolly."

"You told me I didn't have heart disease. So I thought if you looked at the cardiograph . . ."

"I don't need to look at a cardiograph to know you haven't got heart disease," said Vickers dogmatically. "Any child could see it."

"How come you know so much about it?"

"I worked with Dr. Burkhardt in Vienna for five years. It's taken me fifteen years of research in five different fields to prepare me for making my '4-D' Paint."

"Did you say Dr. Burkhardt, the physic over on St. Nicholas Avenue?" interrupted Tommy putting a new drink in front of Tommy. "He's a no good quack. He give my sister Moira something for her bile that put hair on her stomach."

"I'm referring to Dr. Burkhardt of Vienna, a specialist in respiratory . . ."

"She has to shave every three days. It's a lousy nuisance. Her husband is teed off about it."

"How's her bile?" asked the man at the end of the bar belligerently.

"Fine. That is, she don't have no bile left."

"Then what the hell she beefing about?" growled the dark featured beer drinker who looked as though he had been sitting on his stool since the World Series.

"No lady wants hair on her . . ."

"She's got no right beefing!" insisted the man.

"Aw, shuddup, McCarthy." Tommy turned to the others. "McCarthy gets filthy mean every holiday like clockwork."

"Hic, haec, hoc!" impetuously announced Vickers smiling happily.

"Huius, huius, huius," answered Dolly.

Vickers held out his right hand. "Vassar?"

Dolly shook his hand and her head simultaneously. "No, City High, Chattanooga, Tennessee."

"Huic, huic, huic!" riposted the professor.

"Hunc, hanc, hoc," she replied triumphantly.

McCarthy, his beer glass in hand, had staggered towards them.

There was a pause from Vickers as he downed the third drink which Jake, unasked, had put within too-easy reach.

"Your move, Mac," said the impatient girl.

"Ah . . the ab . . ab . . ablative . ." He frowned and then

said with questioning apology, "Hoc, hac, hoc?"

"What kinda talk is that in an American bar?" growled the now angry McCarthy.

"Aw, stow it, McCarthy," cut in Tommy.

"I mean it. They got no right talking hokey-pokey like that!"

"Shaddup, you lousy Black Irishman," growled the thin bartender. "Just because your name is McCarthy you think you can investigate everybody."

"I don't like you!" shouted the beer drinker, waving a dirty fore-finger under Vickers' nose.

The little professor calmly took a drink and then with his right pointed to a row of bottles on a shelf. "Bols!" he said.

"Huh?"

"Bols spelled backwards," said the professor pedantically, "is . . ."

"I know, I ain't stupid. It's S-L-O-B," spelled out the glowering McCarthy who was proud of his education.

Vickers smiled agreeably and nodded at the other.

"S-L-O-B," repeated the dull-witted drinker. "Hey!" Dawn finally came. "You asked for it!" He drew back a big fist. "I'm gonna slough . . ."

Vickers suddenly pulled his left hand out of his pocket and pointed it at McCarthy. To everyone's surprise, including Dolly's, only an empty sleeve waved at the beer drinker.

"Ouch!" shouted McCarthy falling back. "Who punched my nose?"

Tommy climbed agilely under the bar holding a small baseball bat. "Okay, SLOB, out of here. Anyone tries to assault a disabled veteran can't drink in the SHAM-ROCK!"

"What happened to your left hand?" whispered the girl as Tommy was escorting the beer drinker out the front door.

"Don't you remember? We ran out of D-27-3 and we had to use the new solution, D-27-4, on my left hand. It was treated longer with radium. That's obviously the answer to longer lasting . . ."

"Another free drink for a hero of our country!" said Tommy wiping his hands and disappearing under the bar. "One Thomas Collins coming up."

"Noblesse obligato," replied the grateful Vickers bowing graciously and falling off his stool.

"Merry C-C-Christmas," stammered a homey voice.

Vickers, with Dolly's help,

was again on the stool. They turned to see Putlitz, his nose a dull magenta, dragging a lopsided and crumbled Christmas tree through the doorway.

"I g-got it!" he shouted in triumph. "Up in the B-Bronx near P-P-Poe's old house. For half p-price."

"It looks like it's seen every bar between here and there too," noted Dolly.

Impulsively Vickers jumped on top of his stool with an agility surprising to Dolly. "The Christmas tree is merely a phallic symbol. However, the heroes of Thermopolyae salute you!" He held out his glass. "May I propose a toast at this time?"

"Go ahead," said Jake who was glad Christmas came only once a year.

"I drink to the world around me." He tossed off his drink and then recklessly dropped to a sitting position. "Which I never noticed before!"

"Coffee, Tommy," said Dolly. "Strong and black and some Worcestershire sauce." She shook the little man who was grinning like a happy Buddha. "Fun's fun, Mac, but we have work to do."

The professor smiled dazedly. "I've been working for fifteen years. I want fun. How

can I ever thank you for opening up the doors of . . ."

"Well, close the door, Richard. We've got to get some money for Denny or the old house will be torn down."

The professor slapped his cheeks sharply and then sat upright in an imitation of sobriety. "Quite right. What is your porposal?"

"We're going to take you home. You're going to have a little nap. And then tonight we're going to the Club Sixteen."

"Why?"

"On the second floor they have the biggest roulette wheel in town. We're going to win some money."

"But my dear Miss Bush, the chaws of lance . . . I mean . . . the laws of . . ."

"Tonight we're going to repeal the laws of chance"

5

DOLLY was exhausted by the time she had piloted the rubber-legged Vickers to the boarding house. "Oh, brother, that hill is worse coming down than going up!" she panted as she rested at the door.

"What hill?" asked the smiling Vickers.

The door, at that moment,

opened and Mr. Valentine came out. He was very downhearted.

"What's the matter, Mr. Valentine?" asked the observant Dolly.

"They laid me off again!" He turned savagely towards Vickers. "It's not fair giving all the jobs to little boys!" Then he walked towards the Drive.

"He's a messenger boy for a medical supply house," explained Dolly. "At least he is sometimes. He doesn't wear socks because his feet are always sore." They went into the front room where Mrs. Raskolsky was in her favorite chair eating chocolates. The radio was playing.

The hawk-like woman embarrassedly turned off the radio when she saw them. "It's never any good at lunch time. They're doing a Bach cantata at 1:05." She hugged the electric blanket in her lap. "This place gets colder and colder," she complained in a shaking voice.

"Hi!" Mr. Denny, his face as eager as a child's on Christmas morning, came towards them. "You got it? The money?"

"Aw, we haven't got it quite yet," stalled Dolly. "We have to pick up the money tonight at the Club. But it's all

arranged," she added when Denny's face fell.

"I hope you'll both be able to come to our Christmas party tonight. We always have such a truly wonderful time."

"Mg23Po4Ch20 . . . precipitate . . . and then add 100cc HCl," intoned Vickers with a cherubic smile his eyes tightly shut.

"We've been celebrating," explained Dolly. "Come on upstairs, Mac. Time for beddy-bye."

Denny watched Dolly escort the wobbly chemist up the stairs. Then he turned to Mrs. Raskolsky who was busily stealing a light bulb from a table lamp. "I like to see young people enjoying themselves," he said with a touch of paternalism.

Ten minutes later Vickers was tucked in his Spartan cot. He was breathing heavily and his eyes were closed.

Just before she left, Dolly leaned down and softly kissed the inert professor.

"G'nite, mother," mumbled Vickers pursing his lips for another kiss.

Dolly kissed him again. After she had tiptoed out of the room, one of Vickers' groggy eyes opened and he smiled impishly in the faint light.

AT TEN o'clock that night Dolly, dressed in a red evening gown that clung to her like a second skin, knocked on Vickers' door. She had a brown envelope in her left hand.

"Outta your cot and into your socks!" she shouted. There was no answer and she had visions of forcing black coffee into the drunken professor with a siphon.

The door opened. "Won't you come in?" Vickers was faultlessly dressed in tails of another era.

"My God," exclaimed Dolly, "you're immaculate."

"You've no conception," replied the chemist soberly. "My father's dress suit. He was made a Fellow of the Biological Society at Wood's Hole in this very suit."

"I . . . I brought my cardiograph," she said eagerly.

He tossed the brown envelope carelessly on his neat cot. "No need to look at it. I understand we're expected at the Christmas party for a few minutes tonight."

"You remembered?" she asked in amazement.

"I never forget anything."

The party was in full swing when they came into the gaily decorated front room. Put-

litz's Christmas tree looked as scrawny as ever even though it was loaded with assorted ornaments from all the tenants.

Mr. Krumbein and three fellow artists were just concluding a rousing rendition of the Haydn Quartet in B flat, Opus 76, Number 4. The sweating musicians bowed to the enthusiastic applause. Charlu jumped onto the top of the old-fashioned upright piano and, as if inspired by the music, went into the classical 'cello position of cats.

"Do you know anything Irish?" asked Mrs. Castle. "If you do, I'll give you a jig."

The musicians looked at each other and shrugged.

"Thank God, we're spared that," muttered Mrs. Raskolsky turning on her radio.

"Merry Christmas, folks." Denny walked to the beaded archway and greeted the newcomers. "It's a great honor, Dr., Vickers."

"You unlucky kids missed Isaac and his Matzoh Ball Four," said Mrs. Castle lowering her voice. "But I'll bet if you begged he'd come back with a fifty-five minute encore."

"Would you like me to recite THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE now?" volunteered Mr. Valentine,

his face glowing from egg-nog.

"Somebody hand me a screwdriver," called Putlitz who was stretched out under the Christmas tree. "One of these strings of lights don't w-w-work."

"Go ahead, Mr. Valentine," said Mr. Denny.

The old man launched into the poem with vigor making the tree ornaments tinkle with his final roars.

There was applause as he finished.

"If you'd like I'll read the latest chapter from my book," offered the old man.

"He's written three million words already," boasted Mrs. Castle. "It's a helluva lot better'n some of the tripe we get at the Lyric."

"Thank you, Mrs. Castle." The old cavalier bowed gallantly. "Some day THE ADVENTURES OF DOC BENSON will be placed next to ULYSSES..."

"S. Grant," finished Dolly, sotto voce, to Vickers, who managed not to laugh.

"You missed the second act of ACROSS THE ICE," said Denny regretfully. "I took all the parts."

"It was grand," said an old lady with brilliant orange hair who was sitting in the

corner. She was Mrs. Castle's mother.

"In a little while I'm going to sing my new popular song SHE USED TO BE THE TOAST OF BROADWAY BUT NOW SHE'S JUST A CRUMB," said Mr. Denny eagerly. "Don't excite yourself, Mrs. Mulroony," he cautioned when he saw the old lady trying to get out of the chair. "Remember your liver."

"Well, then, why in hell don't someone get me another drink?" she roared.

"Mr. Raskolsky is bringing some more egg-nog in, Mother," said Mrs. Castle. "Keep your shirt on."

Nora, Krumbein's sister-in-law, at that moment descended regally from the second floor and entered the room. She was dressed like Isadora Duncan in one of her more uninhibited moments.

"Now?" she asked flipping a wispy scarf.

"No, dear," said Krumbein softly. "Not now."

"What's she going to do?" asked Mrs. Raskolsky with a touch of sarcasm. "The Dance of the Seven Veils?"

"Tonight I read the future," the huge woman answered in an ominous voice.

"That sounds like fun," said Mrs. Castle brightly.

"Fun?" grunted Mrs. Raskolsky. "Hah!"

"Sourpuss!" shouted Mrs. Castle turning sharply on her old enemy. "We never had no cockroaches in this house till you come! Now they march up from your kitchen to the tune of the damn Pathateek!"

"How dare you talk to me in that tone of voice!" clarified Mrs. Raskolsky. Then she pointed an accusing finger at Mrs. Castle's stockings which hung down from her knees. "Cossack!"

"Ladies, it's Christmas Eve! Peace on Earth," cut in Denny.

"How dare you use so much electricity?" Mrs. Castle pulled the plug of the electric blanket in the hawk-faced woman's lap. In doing so she also shut off the radio.

"How dare you turn off Peter Ilyitch Tchaikovsky!!"

"Who wants another drink?" asked Mr. Raskolsky entering with a big punch bowl.

The argument stopped as everyone lined up for drinks.

"And now," announced Denny when everyone had a glass, "I'd like to wish every one of you a Merry Christmas! Drink up!"

As they tilted their drinks there was a loud explosion un-

der the Christmas tree and all the lights went out.

There was silence for a moment and then Putlitz said in a small voice, "Won't someone please hand me a screwdriver?"

Dolly pulled at Vickers, fascinated by the party. "We've got to get ready. C'mon upstairs."

While she was spraying the professor with his paint she nodded towards the brown envelope on his cot. "Do you think that cardiograph will show why I get a pain in my side every so often? A real sharp one."

The half visible Vickers went to the bed and took out the cardiograph. After examining it for a minute he threw it down. "Just as I thought, you haven't got a trace of heart disease."

"You're sure?" asked the excited girl.

"Of course, I'm sure. Here, you missed the back of my left leg."

"But why do I get those sharp pains?"

"You've got a small cancer, that's all."

"THAT'S ALL!"

"Don't be so nervous. It's nothing. It's not too late to be treated satisfactorily. I'll take you to a friend of mine tomorrow. Best man in New

York. I worked with him . . ." The partially visible body turned. An invisible hand picked up the pair of horn-rimmed glasses. "Spray these. Then my eyes won't be visible."

"If you ever put this gook on the market, I've got a good name for it."

"What?"

"Vicker's Vanishing Cream. Say how in heck does the stuff work anyway?"

"It's very simple. Oh, by the way, let's fill this pocket sprayer with some extra paint in case some spots show up later." The sprayer rose magically and dipped into a large kettle. "You understand Einstein's Theory of Relativity?"

"Who doesn't?"

"Before I forget it, I'm sending Albert this little bottle of D-27-4." He showed the girl the label which was marked GUESS WHAT. "I'd love to see the look on his face when he experiments with it!"

"You didn't explain about the paint."

"Well, you see there are three physical dimensions. However . . . well, that is . . . Let's take it from another angle: the refraction of light makes . . ." The professor shrugged his shoulders with defeat. "It works, doesn't it?"

There was a rattling of pots on the large gas stove.

"What are you doing now? We've got to hurry."

"I'm simmering twenty gallons of D-27-4. I think I finally hit on the perfect formula."

The two sneaked down the stairs. No one noticed them as they tiptoed out the front door because Krumbein's sister-in-law was telling the future to the entranced audience.

"I think she's living in sin with Papa Krumbein," said Dolly as they climbed up the steep hill.

"With that woman it wouldn't be a s-s-sin," chattered the chilly professor.

"My gosh, we've forgotten your coat again," said Dolly. "Let's go back and . . ."

"No . . ." An invisible arm tugged her towards the subway. "It's only in the m-mind."

7

CLUB SIXTEEN was a few blocks east of the Great White Way, located in an old brownstone front mansion, still known as the Moncke House to aged New Yorkers. On the first floor was the usual neon-lit bar and dance floor. The tables were the size of very large pie plates and

the area for dancing would have been sufficient for half a dozen telephone booths. The only things big about Club Sixteen were the Men's Room and the checks.

When Dolly, vibrant and stunning in her fur stole and sleek red evening gown, walked up to the bar, all three bartenders rushed over to greet her.

"Dolly, keed!" shouted Harry the Horse, a portly and distinguished man, looking like a retired bank executive. "Long time no see. How come?" he babbled in Lum Fong Chinese.

"Hi, Harry, how's the dump been getting along without me?"

"Boy, we got a crummy line now," said Little Al, a huge glowering man. "The new kids all studied with Martha Graham."

"How's the ticker?" asked Harry tentatively.

Dolly smiled. "I want a daiquiri that'll talk back to me. Does that answer your question?"

Harry's aquiline face broke into smiles. "Coming right up, keed."

Dolly's fur ruffled mysteriously as though a breeze had passed by. There was a disapproving look on her face and then she reluctantly

called to Harry. "And give me a Tom Collins for a chaser."

"You trying to make Earl Wilson's column?" laughed Harry.

While Dolly sipped her drink, she and Harry talked of Mousey Barnett, the no-talented dance director at the club, who was still stealing his routines from the Latin Quarter and getting tips from the customers for introductions to his girls.

"How's the second floor doing these days?" she finally asked casually.

"Still getting the biggest play in the city. There's two born every minute in this man's town."

"Who's jockey on the wheel?"

"Sleepy-Eye Peters. He's new since your time."

The girl inclined her ear to the right. "Say, Harry, how's about a straw?"

"Straw, what for? You wanta take a vote?"

"I want to pretend I'm Shep Fields and make some rippling rhythm in my Tom Collins."

"What kinda bars you been bending your elbow at?" he replied handing her a slightly limp straw.

"You remember Tommy Toomey, the only unphilosophical bartender in the

Union? He's got a dive on our corner."

"Good old Toomey . . ." The straw surreptitiously jumped into the Tom Collins all by itself and the drink quickly evaporated. "Remember the time the drunken queen come in here and asked . . ." His eyes widened. "Hey, what's happened to your Tom Collins?" he asked looking at the empty glass.

"I . . . ah . . . drank it."

"I could of swore . . ." His face was ashen.

"Okay, I'll tell you the truth, Harry. I got a big pet mongoose named Spencer. He's drinking it."

Harry laughed and went to the other end of the bar.

"Watch yourself, Mac," whispered Dolly. "We'd better get up to the game room in a few minutes."

The band came back from its break and began playing a rhumba medley.

"No," she answered to a softly phrased question. "You can't have another drink. I don't care if you still are cold. One more and you'll really be out cold!" Two couples near them left the bar and began to dance, leaving four almost full glasses. "You're going to turn into another Puttlitz!"

The straw flew out of the

empty Tom Collins and into the nearest of the four deserted drinks. A Manhattan disappeared like some vaguely Oriental magic.

"Mac!" she hissed desperately at the amateur drinker. "Don't mix your drinks." But even as she spoke, an Old-Fashioned became a pair of stranded ice cubes. There was a loud belch from an empty stool.

"Gesundheit," said Harry automatically turning to the Old-Fashioned. "Hey, what the . . ." He thought he heard a faint bubbling noise and his eyes grew as big as silver dollars when he saw a whiskey and soda erratically disappear. "Hey, am I going nuts? Little Al, come here!" He pointed at the empty whiskey and soda glass which now almost toppled onto the bar.

"Aw, it's some trick glass," said Little Al who wouldn't have been surprised if he'd seen Aladdin swoop in on a magic carpet.

"And what the devil's that straw doing in that glass?" He called to Al who had turned away.

"What straw?" asked Al looking at the now strawless glass. "You better go downstairs and have a little snooze, boy."

"I want to dansh," whis-

pered a hoarse voice in Dolly's left ear.

"How can we dance?" angrily answered Dolly.

"Like the other people."

"But it would look stupid with me dancing all by myself. Anyway, you told me you'd never danced in your life."

"Thash why I want to dansh. For fifteen yearsh I been living in a test thube. I never knew what I was missh-ing . . ."

"Stop breathing on me. You'll ruin my complexion."

"Besides, I've been washing. Itsh very simple. Bing-bang-bang. A very elemental rhythmmmmm."

"I will not dance with you. And that's final. We've got to go up to the gambling . . ."

"If you won't I'll cut in on one of the danshers out there!" threatened the other.

"Stop acting like a jerk. Tonight you're not smart enough to be an oaf."

"Half an oaf is better'n none," retorted the insistent professor.

"Oh, all right. But just one dance."

Many strange things had happened in Club Sixteen since its gala opening the night 3.2 beer was legalized but nothing was as odd as Dolly, her face a frozen mask,

...NOW YOU DON'T

jerkily doing a rhumba with no apparent partner.

"Hi, Dolly!" called Rex the bandleader. "Nice having you back with us. See you're getting up in the world doing a solo."

The other boys in the band threw out remarks at the embarrassed girl.

"When do you put the lampshade on your head, Doll?" asked the trumpet player.

"Quit riding her," put in the Drums, "she's dancing with the Invisible Man."

Although Macready was a very clever and well coordinated man he found out that dancing the rhumba was a little more than bing-bang-bang. As a matter of fact, after several stumbling tours around the floor, it developed into the more elemental bang-bang-bang. The other couples were now glaring angrily at Dolly as they nursed aching shins.

Finally Herbert, the outwardly genial co-owner of the Club, came up to her. "Dolly, girl, it's grand seeing you again." He put a firm hand on her shoulder and led her off the floor. "Come on over to the bar and have a drink for old times."

Relieved at being rescued,

Dolly sighed heavily. "I think I'll give your wheel a whirl tonight."

"Don't be a sap, hon. You know you can't win," he said in a low voice.

"I just feel lucky tonight. I hit a Lucky Buck today so I want to blow in my winnings."

"Okay, if you insist. Just tap four times."

The most famous gambling rooms in the city were located on the second floor of the old building. Fifty people were crowded around half a dozen assorted games of chance in the tastily decorated suite of rooms. In what had once been the master bedroom of Penbrooke Moncke III now rested a whirring roulette wheel.

"Are you sober enough to know what to do?" whispered Dolly to her wobbly partner.

"I have possession of all my facilities," was the hissing reply.

"Faculties," corrected the girl.

"You go to your church, I'll go to mine. I have facilities."

The girl bought fifty dollars worth of chips and found a place at the green table. She waited for a few minutes to give her companion time to get well situated and then put half the chips on Number Ten. She was afraid to use all

her chips for fear Macready would make a mistake the first time.

The wheel spun madly and then came to its dramatic conclusion with the little black ball far from Number Ten. But the wheel jerked erratically several times and then the ball came to rest in Number Ten.

"Ten, Black," called the puzzled croupier, Sleepy-Eye. He had been wearing out his right toe trying to get the ball into the lightly played section in the low fifties.

The wheel spun again and once more Ten paid off. A tower of chips was pushed towards the excited girl.

"Let 'em ride, Sleepy," said Dolly, her heart pounding rapidly. Good old Macready, she thought, as the wheel spun the third time. Word of Dolly's big winnings had spread to the other games and the table was now jammed. As the wheel slowed down, Dolly saw two fat men near the spinning disk being pushed apart by some unseen force. But the opening was immediately closed by the twin mountains of flesh. Just as the wheel stopped there was a grunt of pained surprise from one of the fat men who danced around holding one leg. The ball jumped and fell

into Number Eleven. Just as the croupier was about to shout out the good news, the black pellet hopped neatly into Number Ten slot.

"Number Ten, black," hoarsely muttered the usually unemotional Sleepy-Eye.

Dolly, with the help of two enthusiastic crew-cut boys from Princeton, cashed in her chips and was presented with a neat package of bills marked \$5,000.

"Hey," protested one of her new escorts who should have been going to the Harvard Business School, "she won a lot more than that."

"I'm sorry, Dolly," said the shift-eyed cashier, Turk. "But I'll have to get Herbert to give you a check for the rest. Be a sweet kid and wait in the office here for a minute."

She dismissed the two eager boys and went into the simple office. In movies, she noted, the offices of all night clubs were ornate and filled with the modern Masters. This one was small, dirty and the only picture was one of Jack Dempsey being catapulted out of the ring by the amazed Firpo.

The door of the office opened and then closed with quiet emphasis.

"Psst," said an alcoholic voice.

"Psst yourself, John Barleycorn. No one can hear you in here. You were great out there, Mac."

"Not sho great," answered the invisible professor. "I've been dropping a few eaves and I've found out they sh-shuspect shomething. Your friend Herbert said he was going to give you shome . . . what was that now? Oh, yes . . . lumpsh."

Her face went white. "Those guys don't play potsy! They're rough. What am I going to do?" She looked desperately towards the strong smell of assorted spirits.

"The ansher is quite obvious." A sprayer appeared from nowhere and the girl felt a damp, prickly sensation on her neck.

"Mac, you're such a comfort to a girl." She closed her eyes. "Hurry up. I want to be a gone girl before those goons get here."

The girl opened her eyes and looked down at her feet. She was footless.

There was an empty hiss from the sprayer. "Paints'h all gone," said Vickers.

"I'm all invisible anyway. So what?"

Vickers coughed politely. "My dear Miss Bush, you are

entirely invisible. . . invisible. . . invisible. . ."

"Invisible," offered the relieved girl.

"Except for one area."

"One area. Where? I can't see any of me."

"The visible. . . the visible. . ."

"The visible. Yes, yes, what?"

"The portion visible you can't see. It is your posterior."

"My posterior. . ."

"Commonly referred to as the butt-ox."

The girl ran to the full length mirror on the door and craned her neck. A well-formed bottom, clothed in red satin, wiggled slightly in the mirror. "Oh, my . . . Why did you have to leave that for last?"

There was the pounding of heavy feet outside the door.

"The lath the best of all the game," was the furry reply.

The door opened and Herbert, the cashier and four burly assistants who looked like the sons of the Neanderthal man burst into the room.

"Okay now, Dolly, what's this I hear about . . ." Herbert looked around the room. "I thought you said she was in here, Turk?"

"She was," replied the cashier. "I saw her come in. Hey,

boss, what's that red flag doing over by the door?" He pointed in wonder at the departing Dolly.

"There's something fishy! Close that door," ordered Herbert.

The cashier started to close the door when the large glass framed picture of Firpo gaping at Dempsey jumped from the wall and crashed over his head. He peered dazedly through the frame as the red flag fluttered out of sight.

"You were magnificent!" exulted Dolly as they tripped down the brownstone steps. "I insist we call our first son Firpo."

"Firpo? Who is Firpo?"

"The Wild Bull of the Pampas."

"O," answered Vickers as though that explained everything. "Now where to?"

"EEEEEEK!" A famous movie star who was also famous for her love of the bottle screamed as she started to climb the steps of the Club Sixteen. The reason, of course, was the visible part of Dolly.

"Let's scam out of here, Mac," cried the girl.

A police whistle blew shrilly. "Hey!" cried one of New York's Finest. "What the devil's going on?"

Dolly and Vickers as they

turned to hide from the cop bumped into two plier salesmen from Oshkosh and their girl friends. All six tumbled to the pavement amid wild confusion.

"What's coming off here anyway?" queried the puzzled cop running towards the tangled group. Dolly in the fall had lost her fur stole and now her arms and shoulders were visible.

"It's aliens from Mars!" screamed one of the plier salesmen. The policeman pulled out his club and dashed towards Dolly, alien or no alien. Just as he was about to seize the exposed shoulders, an unseen male foot tripped him and he piled on top of the two fallen party girls.

Dolly and Vickers dashed across the Avenue of the Americas, bowled over a hot chestnut man on the west side of the street and raced towards Broadway.

The policeman, meanwhile, had tapped with his club on the sidewalk and a mounted officer galloped down the street towards them like Roy Rogers in the last reel. Vickers pulled the girl into a gaudily-lit Penny Arcade that extended to the next block.

Three pimple-faced boys, home for the holidays from Choate, were just coming up

for air after spending their pennies on HER BOUDOIR and other similar co-educational scenes. They gaped to see the Daliesque section of Dolly twinkle past them. They swallowed their gum and started to shout.

Two frightened but angry green eyes suddenly glared at them out of nowhere and their shouts froze in their throats.

"Lesh get a taxi," suggested Vickers as they pushed the door and stepped into the cold once more. "I'm freezHING."

"Well, what d'ya think I am. One of the original Hot Peppers?"

"My head ish frozn." He sneezed. A man with a Homburg passed at that moment. The Homburg flew from the man's head.

"Hey, what the . . ." The man looked around but couldn't see his hat for it was hidden behind the invisible Vickers. The man then ran down the street thinking the wind had blown it away.

"Thish is more like it," said Vickers. A hat, gaily tilted, appeared at head level. "Theresh a taxi. Hey, taxi, attention, s'il vous plait!"

There was a squeal of brakes and an unseen hand opened the rear door of the taxi.

"Hey, you can't . . ." whispered the exasperated Dolly.

But she was pushed into the cab and Vickers followed her.

"Where to, folks?" asked the taxi driver turning around to look at his fares. "Oh, Mary Mother . . ." he moaned when he saw a pair of white shoulders sitting next to a rakish Homburg. With a shriek of terror he jumped out of his cab and ran down the street. At that moment came the ominous animal growl of a police car and the angry clopping of even closer horse's hooves.

"The cops!" cried Dolly. "What're we going to do?"

The invisible man of action dove into the front seat and the taxi jerked forward in frantic kangaroo leaps. "Thish is the first time I ever drove a car," apologized Vickers. "Now, let me shee. The standard shift is shaped like H . . ."

"The heck with the H. This thing is probably shiftless. Get this crate out of here."

The police siren grew louder. The clattering of hooves on pavement now sounded like all Four Horsemen in search of the Apocalypse. There was the blast of a whistle and the mounted po-

liceman dashed alongside of them.

"Hey, pull over there!" he shouted to the bucking car. Then he looked in the cab and saw it was driven by a Homburg. The policeman had been an honor graduate of the Academy and the City of New York might well be proud to know that Officer Grodowsky did not faint at this harrowing sight. "Stop!" he cried.

Unfortunately the policeman's horse was not made of as stern stuff as his master and one look at the Homburg was enough for him. With a wild neigh he leaped over a row of ashcans in a style that would have won him a ribbon at any horse show.

Meanwhile Vickers had mastered the controls of the taxi (as a matter of record they *were* the old-fashioned H shift) and was speeding towards the Avenue of the Americas. The police car stopped to avoid hitting the usual crowd of curious Metropolitan onlookers who gather miraculously at a moment's notice. By the time it threaded its way through the chattering crowd, there was no trace of the missing taxi.

Thirty minutes later, a driverless taxi scraped against the curbing at 139th Street just off the Drive.

"No one's around," whispered a male voice. "Let's go!"

The rear door of the taxi opened and a pair of gleaming shoulders floated out.

"I . . . I have a funny feeling," said Vickers in a quavering and almost sober voice. "I think I'm going to be shick."

"Good," retorted Dolly self-righteously, "I hope you're good and shick and . . ."

Vickers' head popped into sight. His normally blue eyes were flecked with red.

"Welcome home," greeted the girl. "Glad to see you again. I was getting a little tired of the little man who wasn't there."

In a few seconds the rest of Vickers appeared. The girl gulped, for the professor stood under the street lamp, in the cold breeze swirling off the Hudson, in nothing but a pair of shorts and blue socks.

"W . . . what happened?"

"It's D-27-4. Too much radium! It has dishintegrated all the material it's touched. I'm cold!"

"Well, thank God I was painted after you. I'd hate to get caught out here in my . . ."

"I am afraid . . ." he started. But his fears were realized before he could finish the

sentence. Her head materialized and then the rest of her body. "You must have nylon undergarments," said Vickers looking at her curiously. "They dishintegrated by oshmosis."

A piece of red material the size of a small flag dropped to the sidewalk and it was all that was left of the girl's complete wardrobe.

Without saying a word, the nude, bare-footed girl sprinted down the Drive past an old man who was taking his equally old dog out for a last tour of the hydrants. The old man didn't notice Dolly but the dog, who had a few barks left in him, did and bayed like Bugle Annie in his efforts to follow what was evidently a lively party.

"Hey, wait for me!" cried Vickers dashing after her.

The old man *did* see the professor and he snorted in disgust. What would these athletes think of next, he grumbled as he saw the little man in white shorts rounding the corner of 138th Street.

8

A FEW minutes later there was a tentative knock at Dolly's door. She cautiously opened it and saw the wavering Macready, dressed in his

stained sweatshirt and tattered gray slacks.

"Are you all right?" he asked in a voice now completely sobered by the cold and series of events.

Dolly had slipped on a bathrobe and was combing her hair. Her eyes were filled with tears. "I lost it," she sobbed.

"Lost what?" asked the professor. "You seemed to have everything when I saw you last." When he saw the blush on her cheeks he stammered in confusion. "I . . . er . . . mean . . ."

"The money. I dropped the money some place."

"You mean this?" Macready held up the sheaf of bills. "You dropped it when your clothing disintegrated. Rather interesting complication, wasn't it? I wonder if anything will happen to our skin?"

"If my skin falls off I'm going to be very upset with you," she said taking the money. "Y'know, you're a real queer crotch. Can you understand everything I'm saying now?"

"If you mean am I sober, the answer is an unqualified maybe. I still feel woozy but my censor is back in complete control. I must have been crazy back there at that night

club. Did I really dance with you or did I imagine it?"

"You'll need a few lessons. Bing-bang-bang is not enough."

Macready sighed. "I'm horribly humiliated. I shall never touch another drop!"

"S . . . s . . . s . . . sst!" Denny hissed at them from the hallway.

"Come on in, Mr. Denny. We got it!" called the jubilant girl.

They were surprised when Denny entered with a sad face.

"Give with a smile. Here's your money. More than enough too. \$5,000!" The girl handed him the money.

Denny took the money half-heartedly. "I'm afraid it won't do any good now."

"Why not?" asked Macready.

"We just found out from Mrs. Raskolsky's cousin Alvin who goes with a girl whose father's brother works for the City that Stinker Hennessy is bringing a special wrecking crew at dawn to start tearing down the house."

"On Christmas morning?" Dolly was amazed.

"He heard about Flynn so he got special permission."

"Can't your friend Flynn do anything about it?" asked Macready.

"Sure. But it'll take him till noon tomorrow since it's a holiday. I just had a call from him and he said if we could hold off Hennessy's wreckers till 12 o'clock he'd have all the restraining papers ready."

"Let's just have a sit-down strike," suggested Dolly.

Denny shook his head. "Flynn says they can tear down even if we're in the dump so long's the eviction notice's been given." He shook his head sadly. "I'm afraid the old house is having its last night on earth."

"I've got it!" suddenly shouted Macready.

"Whatever it is," muttered Dolly, "it's bound to be original."

"I've got twenty gallons of D-27-4 upstairs!" he shouted. "We'll paint the front of the house."

"It's too late for improvements," said Denny not understanding.

"Mr. Denny, Mac here has invented a paint that makes things invisible and . . ."

Denny shook his head. "You two better get some rest."

"It's the truth, Mr. Denny," said Macready. "Come upstairs and I'll prove it to you!"

Denny, still more than skeptical, followed them to the third floor. "Don't think I'm an old fuddy-duddy but the condition you two came home in tonight was . . . well . . ." He clucked. "In the summertime, all right! But you'll catch your death on a night like this." Then in his inimitable manner he made a compliment out of a criticism when he added, "I will have to admit, Dolly, you've certainly lost weight on that new diet of yours."

9

DAWN was just sticking its unhealthy pallid fingers over the horizon when Macready stepped down from the ladder leaning against an invisible wall and sighed heavily. "Can you see anything now?"

Dolly walked back to the middle of the street and looked up and down. Nothing remained of the old green boarding house except a section of drainpipe. "That pipe down there!" She pointed and Denny gave the area a burst with his electric sprayer. The two men then hauled down the ladder and joined the shivering girl in the street.

"My God, it's a miracle!" murmured Denny. "If I had-

n't seen it I wouldn't have . . ."

"One thing . . ." muttered Macready critically.

"What's that?" asked the girl who had grown to have a profound respect for the professor.

"Doesn't the back of the apartment house over there on 137th Street look funny to you?"

"I don't see anything funny," said Denny.

"Oh, golly, I see what you mean," moaned the girl. "Look, Denny . . . we've blocked out our house but it makes a big black blank on the first few stories of that apartment building."

"Oh, they'll never notice that," said Denny. "People are very unobservant."

There was a rumble of heavy trucks and three big vehicles pulled up in front of the invisible house.

Hennessy, the contractor, a large red-faced Irishman, stepped out of the lead truck and opened the iron gate in front of 620. Then he stopped and even his back showed his utter amazement. He turned and a white face looked at the three people in the street.

"W . . . what street is this?"

"This is 138th Street, Mr. Hennessy. I suppose you're looking for my house," said Denny mildly.

"I . . . I . . . I . . . I . . ."

"Good lyrics for a South American tune," noted Dolly.

"B . . . b . . . b . . . but . . ."

"We had a little accident," explained Denny. "The professor here . . . oh, let me introduce Dr. Macready Vickers of Columbia. He had the third floor front and he was experimenting . . ."

"With radioactive elements," put in Macready somberly when Hennessy stepped towards the house. "You can examine the wreckage if you like but I think you'd be safer out here. Radioactive dust, y'know."

Hennessy backed into his truck. "Wh . . . wh . . . wh . . . what . . ."

"This boy uses fewer words than Hemingway," said Dolly.

"Go on back," shouted Hennessy to the two other trucks. "We don't need to do nothing."

The second floor front window opened and Krumbein's tousled head appeared in the empty space. "Could I be of any assistance?" he asked politely.

"Go back to bed!" hissed Dolly.

Krumbein's head vanished just before Hennessy looked curiously towards the house.

"Who was that?" asked the contractor. "Somebody still in

the wreckage? Funniest darn hole I ever seen. Just big and black." He waved his arm as the two trucks drove off down the street.

"Oh, no. Nobody in there," said Denny.

"The world comes to an end at 6:45 tomorrow morning!" intoned a loud ominous voice. This time Nora Doyle's turbaned head appeared twenty feet from the ground. Hennessy's mouth dropped open. "Prepare to meet your maker!" instructed Nora, then disappearing into nothingness.

"D . . . d . . . d . . . did you s . . . s . . . ee . . ." stammered Hennessy.

"See what?" asked Macready looking at the contractor soberly.

"What did you have for breakfast?" asked Dolly. "Wheaties with schnapps?"

"I thought I saw . . ." He smiled weakly. "I . . . I guess I been working too hard, at that."

"Now Hennessy Tennessy," said Dolly, "go tootle your flute and leave us to our tragedy."

The big Irishman, his face a study in amazement, opened the truck door and slowly got in. "Back to the garage, Bill," he said still dazed from the experience.

THE most amazing thing happened. D-27-4 must have been exposed to the radium longer than planned, because at exactly 9:37 that morning the front wall of the green boarding house disintegrated completely leaving No. 620 looking like the cross-section of a stomach in THE MEDICAL JOURNAL. All the front rooms of the house were exposed to the curious public.

At 9:48, Officer Grennan escorted Putlitz, sadder and now wiser than ever, to what had once been the front door.

"Something's happened to the front of your house," said the observant officer to Denny who was sitting in the front room in his overcoat.

"Yes, we know," said Denny agreeably. "Fast-action termites."

"Another ticket," groaned Putlitz. "I g-g-got 'nother ticket. That makesh thirty-eight tickets I got this year already. And I was up at three o'clock to move my car too. What k-k-kinda life is t-that anyway?" He staggered up the stairs to his room, completely oblivious of the gaping crowd in the street.

Mrs. Castle came into the front room carrying her

mangy rabbit coat. "Mrs. Raskolsky!" she called.

The hawk-faced woman came up from the other basement apartment, her face blue with cold.

"Why doncha wear my coat, Mrs. Raskolsky? And come on over to our side. We got four whole walls."

"Tth . . . that's very kind, Mrs. Castle. I certainly will." She put on the old coat gratefully. "Let me go get my radio first."

"Oh, beejasus don't forget the radio," said Mrs. Castle softly. "I couldn't do without the goddam radio!"

The sad unharmonious wheeze of a street musician, the last of his tribe, drew the attention of the shivering crowd. An old man, his nose running and his eyes red with cold, came up from the Drive playing seven musical instruments simultaneously.

Macready who was standing in the front yard with one arm possessively around Dolly guessed the tune was THE SIDEWALKS OF NEW YORK. But the girl, more familiar with the seamy side of life, knew it was SHE WAS ONLY A BIRD IN A GILDED CAGE.

The old man opened the gate and stepped into the

yard. "My back teeth are floating," he said in a hoarse whisper to Denny who was rocking contentedly. "Do you mind if I use your men's room?"

"Go right ahead," said the agreeable man pointing to the staircase. "Second floor to the right."

"Maybe he has crabs," cautioned the realistic Mrs. Castle.

"Go on," said Denny waving the uncertain old man up the stairs. "He's a musician, isn't he?"

Mrs. Raskolsky came up from her apartment with the radio. When she saw the old man heading for the bathroom she said, "What if he's got crabs?"

Just then old Mrs. Mulroony came puffing up the stairs from the other side of the house. "Hey!" she shouted to the assembled audience. "Guess what!"

"What?" asked Denny, the perfect straight man.

"Charlu is out in the backyard with Fluffy, the super's part Persian!"

"So what?" asked Macready.

"So what?" Dolly smiled and affectionately ruffled the professor's luxuriant hair. "Fluffy is a lady."

Macready scratched his

head and then turned to the girl. "My paint evidently has hidden factors."

11

A YEAR has passed since the brief disappearance of the house on 138th Street. With the \$5,000 Mr. Denny put in a new front and made all the necessary repairs.

Dolly and Macready continued to live on the entire third floor until the birth of Albert (for Macready's Princeton friend) Firpo Vickers. Now the little family lives happily in Rowayton, Conn. Macready who had never kissed a girl before he met Dolly, bought four books on that and allied subjects and has proven to be an adept and original student.

You are probably curious about the outcome of the

D-27-4 series. Ninety-eight subsequent experiments resulted in invisibility but continued disintegration. As an invisibility paint it, therefore, was a sad failure. However, a month after Dolly had been subjected to its spray, X-rays showed the complete disappearance of her cancer. And now on the front of the green boarding-house is a bronze plaque which reads: IN THIS HOUSE DR. MACREADY VICKERS DISCOVERED THE CURE FOR CANCER.

One final note: Charlu moved to Rowayton with the Vickers. Not a whisper of scandal followed this nicely readjusted cat from the city and he is now considered one of the honored Rajahs in this fashionable but healthy suburban community. Everybody calls him Charley.

THE END

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Did you know that there's nothing particularly modern about the rocket? It was used as a military weapon by our ancestors as far back as 3,000 B.C.

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NO WAY OUT

BY CHRISTOPHER THAMES

They took me through the green door and strapped me into that big chair and threw the switch. But instead of being dead, I was walking along a lonely road with mythology's most beautiful girl!

THERE are two ways to escape the death house in Sing Sing. Either you receive a last minute reprieve or they carry you through the back door in a plain pine casket.

I took the third way out.

It was five minutes to eleven of a Thursday night in June. A balmy, star-sprinkled night, I later learned. A night for lovers, not a night for death. But I was going to die, courtesy of the People of the State of New York, who had, two months before, found me guilty of murder. I was, and am, innocent.

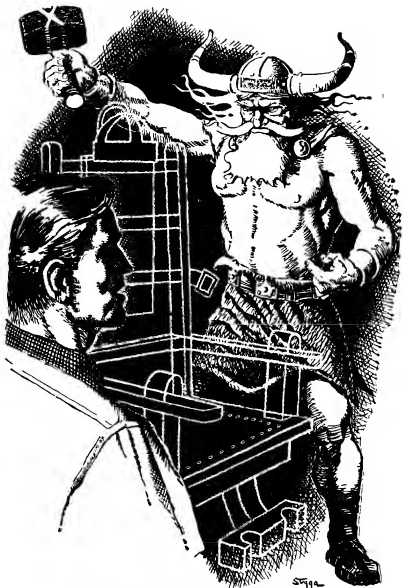
The metal door grated open. The warden stood there, a stocky man with the guileless face of a school teacher. With him were two guards and the prison chaplain.

"You'll have to go now, son," the chaplain said.

I nodded. I stood up and crushed out my cigarette. As I reached the door of the cell, the guards fell in one on each side of me. We started walking, the warden in front, then the guards flanking me, the chaplain bringing up the rear. The last mile is only a few dozen feet, from the rivet-studded door of the death cell to the smaller green door, open now, beyond which is the oak chair, the clamps, the straps, and death.

They marched me in there. A dozen spectators lined the benches. Newspapermen, I guessed. A prison doctor stood off in the dark shadows with a stethoscope dangling from his neck.

The warden cleared his throat and read the sentence which had brought me here. I'd heard it so often I knew it



I had my choice: the electric chair or Thor's hammer.

by heart, but I listened to his droning voice. "Within two weeks of this date, the Sheriff of Manhattan County shall deliver the said John Wilson to the Warden of Sing Sing Prison, where he shall be kept in solitary confinement until the week beginning June twenty-second, and upon some day of the week the Warden of Sing Sing Prison shall do execution upon the said John Wilson in the mode and manner prescribed by law."

The guards kneeled near the high-backed oak chair, their fingers fumbling with the straps and clamps. The warden said, "Do you have any last statement, Wilson?"

I shook my head. What was the use of saying I was innocent now?

The warden raised his arm, signaling the guards to secure me in the chair. Raised his arm—and held it there.

The guards stood motionless, looking at him.

The prison doctor was adjusting the stethoscope in his ears. He stood that way, with his hands against his ears, unmoving.

The chaplain was a grim-faced statue.

The dozen spectators were carved from granite, the looks of nervous anticipation frozen on their faces.

Everyone had turned to stone.

Sometimes it happens like this, I thought. The mind, unable to face the reality of death, retreats into insanity. The world is standing still for you, Johnny boy. All you have to do is walk out of here. Like hell.

I poked a finger against the chest of the guard on my right. He kept on standing there. I poked harder, but he felt like stone. This is fun, I thought, wondering how long it would go on. I hauled off and slugged the guard across the jaw with my fist.

I yowled.

He stood there.

He felt exactly like stone.

"Hey!" I shouted.

There was no answer.

I lifted the flap of the guard's holster and removed his .45 automatic, tucking it in the waistband of my prison trousers. I expected all the statues, the warden statue, the chaplain statue, the guard and spectator statues, to start moving and yelling any second. I took a deep breath and walked out of there.

Back through the short green corridor and through the cell block of the death house. I could see the faces of a few of the other condemned men, staring at me through

the bars without seeing me. Carved from stone. A stone guard stood at parade rest in front of the cell block door. I took the ring of keys from his belt, found the right one, opened the door and kept walking. There was another door, and another key that fit. Then I was in the prison yard. There was a light on in the guard tower and the silhouette of a man up there near the shadow of a monstrous machine-gun.

"Hey!" I shouted.

Stone doesn't answer.

I kept walking.

Ten minutes later I was on the highway leading to Ossining. The woman was waiting there for me. It was dark, but I could see her. After what had happened, it didn't seem odd I could see in the dark. The woman wasn't made of stone. She said, "I was waiting for you, Johnny. I'm Diana."

If she meant the Roman goddess of the hunt, she looked the part. Diana, a goddess with flashing eyes and golden limbs. She wore a halter and shorts of buckskin. She had a quiver of arrows strapped to her back and a longbow slung across her shoulder. There were cars on the highway, their headlights bright

in the darkness of the night. None of them was moving.

"What are you so surprised about?" Diana said.

"Well, it's just that . . ." But I couldn't say any more. Reaction set in. My legs trembled. My voice was thick in my throat. Back there, I had almost been executed. Now . . .

"You answered our advertisement, didn't you?" Diana demanded.

"What are you talking about?"

"Last December. Our ad in the papers?"

Last December was a different world. Dimly I remembered something about an ad I had answered. It had been a gag, of course.

Diana handed me a scrap of paper. I recognized my signature at the bottom. I read:

HELP WANTED, DEITY

So, you want to be a deity? Several vacancies available. Apply, Olympus, c/o Postmaster, New York. No salesman will call.

NAME John Wilson

ADDRESS 405 East 16th Street,
New York City

OCCUPATION Real Estate Broker

AGE 28

MARITAL STATUS Single

CAN TRAVEL
(Check one) Yes ☒ No ☐

"It was just some kind of gag," I said.

"Here I am."

"Do you know what was about to happen back there?"

"They were going to kill you for a crime you didn't commit."

"Then you—turned them to stone?"

Diana grinned at me. "Hardly," she said. "You have merely been speeded up. Your heart beats thirty-five thousand times a minute instead of seventy. Your reflexes are five thousand times faster. This night shall be like five thousand nights to you. It's the night of the gods, Johnny. We're back on Earth."

You argue with her. Not me. The Sing Sing death house was back down the road a mile or so. I was here. The cars on the highway were motionless but you could smell their exhaust. I said, "You mean I'm hired as a . . . a deity?"

"Your application has been approved provisionally."

"So?"

"There's one vacancy left. The Chief and Mercury haven't seen eye to eye for centuries. The Chief fired him. There are three applicants to be screened."

"But only one vacancy?"

"Yes, Jupiter—"

"That's the Chief?"

"Right. Jupiter will make the final decision. Until he does, I'm your patron."

"What happens to the two applicants who aren't hired?"

"They go right back where they came from."

"Exactly where they came from?"

"Exactly. In your case, the electric chair."

"What kind of job did this Mercury have?"

"He was our messenger."

"That's the job I have to fill?"

"Yes."

"Or else back I go?"

"Back you go."

"I'll be the best messenger you ever saw," I promised.

Diana smiled. "Give me your hand," she said.

I held her hand. I blinked. The Ossining Highway was gone. We stood, still holding hands, on the corner of 47th Street and Fifth Avenue in New York, me in my death-house outfit, Diana in her brief buckskins. The passers-by stood like statues, some with their feet poised on air to take a step, some halfway off the curb and into the street, as if defying the law of gravity. In the middle of the street, a taxi and a gleaming new Olds 88 convertible

had just scraped fenders. The cars were together as if they were glued that way, fender to fender. The red-faced taxi driver was leaning out his rolled down window. His mouth was wide open. Probably, he was getting ready to shout.

It was a completely silent world.

"The sound waves are too slow for your speeded up senses," Diana explained. "Well, here we are."

"I'll get that job," I said.

Diana nodded. "You'd better."

You know how so many stories start. The Olympus Building was, and is, on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 47th Street. In this case, it was, but isn't. It was there briefly, that Thursday night. But you won't find it there now.

Diana and I entered through the revolving door and took the elevator up to the top floor. The elevator operator was a cloven-hoofed satyr name of Pan.

"Some job," he complained to Diana. "Elevator boy."

Diana nodded in sympathy.

"What with hi-fi and all, a piper like me don't have a chance." Pan removed a set of pipes from his leather

trousers and placed them to his lips, playing a doleful melody. "Put in a good word for your old pal Pan when you see the Chief, huh?" he said hopefully.

Diana nodded again and led me off the elevator. "Wait here," she said.

The place was a large reception room, plush-carpeted, with chairs that looked and felt like baby clouds but somehow supported your weight. I sat down in one of them and drifted toward the far wall, watching as Diana approached the receptionist and said, "I've got Johnny Wilson."

The girl, whose name was Io according to the sign on her desk, asked, "Who's he?"

"One of the applicants for Mercury's job."

"Oh, I am sorry," Io said. "Didn't you know?"

Diana shook her head. "Know what?"

"The Chief gave Mercury one more chance."

I popped out of my cloud and walked over to the desk.

Diana was saying, "Are there any other vacancies?"

"No. That was the only one."

"I'm sorry, Johnny," Diana told me. "You'll have to go back. I'm terribly sorry."

I stood there. I didn't think

I could get anywhere arguing, but I wasn't going back under my own power. They'd have to carry me. "Look," I said. "Maybe you need an extra around here. You know, a stand-in. It wasn't my idea, you grabbing me out of the execution chamber like that. Now I'm not going back." Like a would-be suicide in that old joke, I thought with grim humor. You saved my life, now support me.

"I like you, Johnny," Diana said. "I'd like to help you. But regulations . . ."

"Nuts to regulations," I shouted. "I'll see the Chief himself." I walked by Io's desk and headed for the door behind it. The smoked glass of the door bore the legend: JUPITER. Under it, in smaller letters, were the words *Jove* and *Zeus*. Even a god had need for aliases, I thought.

"You can't go in there," Io called in a loud voice.

I heard footsteps behind me. I didn't look back. I opened the door without knocking. Io was shouting: "Hercules! Hercules, help!"

Jupiter-Jove-Zeus was sitting behind a cloud desk. He had a huge chest, bare, matted with thick gray hair. He said, "If Juno sent you, son,

you can march right back and tell her I'm not fooling around with Io."

"No one sent me," I said. "I'm looking for a job."

"What the hell are you, a mortal?"

"Yes, sir."

Jupiter's face took on varying shades of purple. He was going to say something and none of it was going to be pretty, when four figures burst in through the door.

Diana, who looked concerned.

Io, who looked frightened.

A matronly woman who probably once had been beautiful, who looked like she knew how to henpeck Jupiter. Juno, I figured.

A giant of a man in breechclout and muscles.

Io pointed a finger at me, saying, "That's him."

Muscles bellowed and charged across the room toward me. I heard Juno yell, "I told you to get rid of this girl. I don't want Io working in your office."

Then Muscles had reached me. "Clobber him, Herc!" Io cried. She seemed to be enjoying herself.

I sidestepped and watched Hercules lunge by. He crashed into Jupiter's cloud desk, forcing it back against the wall and pinning Jupiter

there like a squashed fly. Juno screamed.

Hercules' voice was louder.

He came for me again, crouching. He was the strongest man—make that deity—who ever lived. If he wrapped his arms around me I was through. I knew it. I wondered if the Olympians had ever learned anything about judo. I prayed they hadn't.

I caught Hercules' arm and spun him up and over in a beal. He landed heavily and looked bewildered. They hadn't.

Hercules was still bellowing, but some of the starch had gone out of him. He swung a roundhouse right. I ducked and found the pressure point under his arm and jabbed it. Hercules fell down again.

I turned to Jupiter, who was pushing out from behind the desk. "I'm applying for Hercules' job," I said.

"Look out!" Diana screamed.

I whirled and barely had time to roll with the blow. If I hadn't, Hercules would have taken my head off. As it was, I wound up flat on my back. This is it, Johnny boy, I thought. Short and sweet. It's back to the execution chamber for you. Hercules took his time. He knew he had me. He

watched me wipe blood from my lips with the back of my hand. He smiled at Io, standing over me and flexing his muscles for her.

"Hit him again," Io said.

It was dirty fighting, the kind they teach you in Marine combat school. The kind I had learned during the Korean War. I grabbed Hercules' ankle with my right hand and jammed my right heel against his kneecap. I pulled the ankle forward with my hand and kicked the kneecap back with the heel of my foot.

There was a cracking sound.

I let go. I stood up. Hercules was on the floor, holding his broken kneecap and howling. I knew he was through and he knew it, but it took some time before Jupiter realized it. Io stood there with hands on hips, waiting for Hercules to get up and finish me. Of course, he wasn't going to.

"He won fair and square," Diana said. Finally understanding what had happened, Io rushed outside to summon Apollo who was, among other things, the Olympian doctor.

"I never would have believed it," Jupiter admitted. "Besting Hercules with his bare hands."

"Listen," I said, keeping my

foot in the door before they slammed it shut, "I still want a job. Why don't you at least give me a chance?"

"Why don't you give him Herc's job?" Diana finished for me. "Herc won't be any good for a long time with that broken leg."

"That's impossible," said Jupiter. "A mortal can't replace a deity."

"It happens every now and then," Diana pointed out. "Look at Mercury. Every time you blow your top at him, you replace him with a mortal."

"But not Hercules."

Juno leaned across the desk and said, "That's what's the matter with you. Some husband I've got. No originality. Afraid to do anything different. What was good enough in the pre-Homeric days is good enough now. Why do you think those Norse upstarts have made so much progress? I'll tell you why. Because they're willing to try something new. They're not old-fashioned like you. Before you know it, they'll outstrip us in everything."

"Now, Juno."

"Hercules was never able to best their strong man, was he? He never defeated Thor in combat."

"No, but Thor didn't polish

him off, either. It was always a draw."

"Look how this mortal handled Hercules. Couldn't he do the same to Thor? Couldn't he?"

Jupiter was about to answer, but at that moment Apollo entered the room and bent down to examine the injured Hercules. "Clean break," he said, probing here and there and making Hercules wince. "He'll be out of commission indefinitely, Chief."

"See?" Juno said. "You have no choice now. This mortal will have to take Hercules' place, won't he?"

"Let me think about it."

"Think, nothing! The Norse Gods are stripping us of our best young people. Only last week Orion defected to their camp. The week before, Damon and Pythias. And Pan is getting restless. You've got to do something, Jupiter."

"What's your name, mortal?" Jupiter demanded, scowling at me.

"Johnny Wilson," I said as Apollo helped the hobbling Hercules from the room. Io followed them, crying softly. If Juno kept her eyes opened, she wouldn't have to worry about Io. Clearly, Io had a new crush.

"Some name for the God of

Strength," Jupiter said. "Johnny Wilson."

Juno grinned at me. We were going to get along all right, I thought. She said, "I wouldn't talk, Zeus Pater. That's what Jupiter comes from, you know. Zeus Pater."

"That was a long time ago."

"Wilson isn't such a bad name," Diana said.

But Jupiter was still frowning. "It has no class. No class at all. Like Thor, Hercules . . ."

"If he can knock the stuffings out of that pompous Norse oaf, Thor," said Juno, "I don't care what his name is. Young man, you've just been hired."

"Well . . ." Jupiter began.

"I said, he's hired. Diana, take him in charge. Teach him the ropes. And hurry. This may be our night on Earth, but as soon as he's ready your Johnny Wilson is leaving Earth to challenge Thor. You understand?"

"Yes," said Diana. "Come on, Johnny."

"Well, it's only a temporary position," Jupiter said. "Until Hercules heals."

Juno nodded.

I got out of there with Diana. Io was sitting at her desk, sobbing. She flipped off the office intercom. She had

been listening to our conversation inside.

"That girl is going to be trouble," Diana predicted.

Two days later, they were throwing a party for me. Sort of a welcome to Olympus. I say two days because I slept twice and ate half a dozen meals, getting to know Diana better in the process. But externally, objectively, almost no time had passed. Outside on Fifth Avenue, the taxi driver was still getting ready to yell. I thought his face looked redder. One of the pedestrians who had one foot suspended off the curb now had his weight down on it. The gods and goddesses were everywhere, though, flitting about among the statues. They procured a strawberry shortcake from Lindy's for my party, stopping to admire the celebrity statues. They filched the roast and all the trimmings from Headquarters Restaurant on 49th Street.

We were gathered in a banquet hall on the tenth floor of the Olympus Building, half a hundred gods and goddesses. Diana offered the first toast—with nectar, of course. "To Johnny Wilson," she said. "May he whip that upstart, Thor."

I touched glasses with

Diana. We drank. Pan and Io stood nearby, waiting expectantly. At first I didn't know why. Then I knew, and knew also it was too late.

My head felt light, too light. Diana looked blurry. She held my arm and said, "Johnny, I don't feel so good."

Pan smirked. Io went to join Hercules, who hobbled into the room on crutches. Everyone was watching us.

"I'd better go and sit down some place," Diana said. I tried to lead her to a sofa. Everything was spinning. Pan followed us across the floor, still smirking.

I turned and hurled my goblet of nectar at Pan. I could hardly see him. I was supporting Diana's weight now, but I was hardly able to support my own. "They gave us a Mickey," I said.

"What," Diana asked, "is a Mickey?" And then found out the hard way.

Pan or someone eased us to the floor.

There was the sound of auto horns. The hum of voices all around us. Someone was yelling:

"You meatball! Don't you know you gotta signal if you make a left turn? You learn how to drive from a mail order house or something?"

The red-faced taxi driver.

I was in time with the world again. So was Diana. She stood next to me, fluffing her long blonde hair. People were staring at us and smiling. Diana in her buckskins. Diana with her bow and arrow. Somehow it hadn't seemed strange in the Olympus Building. It seemed strange now. And me in my death-house suit.

In a few seconds, I thought, Sing Sing would be in an uproar. They wouldn't know how I did it, but they'd know I was out. I wouldn't last five minutes on the streets of New York in this get-up.

"Quick!" I said to Diana. "We've got to get out of here. Speed us up again."

Diana shook her head. "I can't."

A crowd was gathering around us. They were waiting to find out what we were advertising. "You can't?" I gasped.

"That's right, I can't. When you're slowed down to the normal time-speed, it's like a drug. It takes a while to wear off. Sometimes hours, sometimes minutes. Johnny, that means we're trapped here."

Trapped—and Io or Pan or whoever had supplied us with the Mickey had not given us a change of clothing. We

stuck out like the proverbial sore thumbs, and that could mean a return trip to the electric chair for me.

"Then hurry!" I cried, and led Diana in through the night entrance of the Empire Trust Building. It was there where the Olympus Building should have been but wasn't. Don't ask me how to explain it.

The uniformed night watchman said, "You can't come in here at this hour without a pass," and then looked at us. "Well," he added.

I hit him. I didn't like the idea, but it was either a swollen jaw for him or the electric chair for me. Diana stood there unabashed while I stripped him down to his underwear and climbed into his maroon and gold uniform. It wasn't exactly street clothing, but it was the first step. We waited in the shadows near the bank of elevators, wondering how long it would be before a night owl came to catch up on his work in one of the offices upstairs. The watchman had a small portable radio on the sign-in desk. I switched it on and heard:

". . . French Union forces in the Kingdom of Laos. Here is a bulletin just handed to me. Sing Sing, New York. Condemned criminal John

Wilson, scheduled to die in the electric chair twenty minutes ago, has mysteriously disappeared from Sing Sing prison. Authorities are completely baffled. Stay tuned to this station for further developments."

"That's you," Diana said.

I nodded grimly. "Every cop in New York State will be looking for me."

Just then, someone entered the building. I had two or three inches in height on him, but he was stouter. His suit might fit.

"You're new here, aren't you?" he said.

"Yes."

He signed the night book and was about to ring for the one operating elevator. I said, "I'll take you up in one of the empties."

Then Diana came out of the shadows and joined us. The man looked surprised, then grinned. "I'll bet you don't mind night duty at all," he told me.

Diana took the elevator up for us. "Pan taught me," she said.

When we came down ten minutes later, I was wearing the man's charcoal gray suit. I felt sorry for him, but it was like the night watchman. A bruise for him or the execution chamber for me.

"Now what?" Diana demanded. "Are you going to try and clear yourself?"

"I can't."

"You still insist you are innocent?"

"Yes, but the one man who could prove it is dead. It's one of those things where you happen to be the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people. I'm not the first innocent man sentenced to die for a crime he never committed."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"I thought we could get back to Olympus."

Diana shook her head. "It's easy to get out. Hard to get in. Io hates you for what you did to Hercules. Pan is probably working for the Norse gods now. They'll keep us out."

We found a dress shop in the arcade of the building. With a night watchman on duty, there was no need for a burglar alarm here. We outfitted Diana in a skirt and blouse. She didn't like the idea of leaving her bow and quiver of arrows behind, so I wrapped them in a large box and tucked it under my arm.

At that moment, the owner of the dress shop decided to come in and check his inventory.

He saw us closing the door of his shop, which I had opened with the night watchman's master key. He saw the package under my arm. It was enough. He ran outside howling for the police.

We followed on his heels. We sprinted down 47th Street. All we needed was a few seconds to get away.

We didn't have them.

The auto accident on Fifth Avenue had brought the police. They came running now, blowing their whistles, two of the city's finest. "Hey, you! Stop!"

A man was climbing into a car at the curb. I pulled him away from the door and wrenched the keys from his fingers. He stumbled toward Diana, who tripped him. A moment later, we slipped into the stream of westbound traffic. The police pounded down the sidewalk after us.

The light was red at the corner of Sixth Avenue, with half a dozen cars waiting for it to change. I slammed on the brakes and jumped out of the car, Diana alongside me. The police were waiting with drawn revolvers.

"O.K., chum," one of them said, mopping the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief. "Breaking and entering. Resisting arrest. Auto theft.

Anything else in your bag of tricks?"

"Maybe," I told him. I looked at Diana. She looked at me. I said, "Try speeding us up now."

Diana just stood there.

"Well?" I said. I was almost pleading.

"I'm trying, Johnny. I'm trying. It doesn't work. It's still too soon."

We marched back docily with the police to their prowling car on Fifth Avenue. The taxi driver was still yelling. The proprietor of the dress shop took the package from me and opened it. He seemed very surprised when he saw the bow and arrows inside.

"I know this guy," the desk sergeant at the precinct said. "I've seen his face before." A small, gaunt, harried-looking man, he had been playing solitaire when we entered the station.

Someone said, "Hey, did you hear about the prison break up at Sing Sing?"

"I knew it," the desk sergeant said. "That's it. This is the guy."

They all examined me. They found my picture in their B. C. I. files. I was Johnny Wilson, all right.

"It ain't possible," the desk sergeant said. "He was up

in Sing Sing forty-five minutes ago. He couldn't of got here by jet plane so fast. And he didn't have a jet plane."

"You see the picture," one of the patrolmen said.

"I dunno. We better call the captain."

Diana whispered to me, "We could go to Asgard."

Anyplace but this police station, I thought. I said, "Where the hell is Asgard?"

"Where the Norse gods live. Across the Bifrost Bridge. You know."

I said I didn't know, but hastened to add I didn't care.

"The Aesir don't like me," Diana went on. "I'm Graeco-Roman. They won't like you either, if Pan gets word to them about what you did to Hercules. They'll be afraid for their own champion, Thor."

"But that was only a little while ago," I protested. "It isn't even midnight yet."

"It was weeks in our time, remember? They'll know of you."

The police captain came out from a back room, his face draining white when he saw me. It's impossible," he managed to say, "but it's Wilson. Sergeant O'Donald, get me the warden at Sing Sing. Get me the associated press. Get me Life Magazine. Get me..."

"Asgard or anyplace," I said to Diana desperately. "Try to do your stuff now."

One of the policemen approached me with a pair of handcuffs. Diana stood there, concentrating.

The cop with the handcuffs was suddenly a statue. So were all the police.

Pretty soon, they would start calling me Houdini-Wilson.

Pan was walking back and forth on the Bifrost Bridge with a sandwich sign hiding his gnarled body. The sign said:

AESIR UNFAIR TO OLYMPIAN EXPATRIATES

He seemed happy to see us. He said, "I'm real sorry about what I talked me in to doing back there in the Olympus Building."

We wouldn't hold a grudge. We needed an ally.

"What happened to you?" Diana wanted to know as she stripped off the skirt and blouse and stood there in her buckskins. I liked her much better that way too.

"These Aesir," Pan complained. "Some gods. They said if I got rid of Johnny Wilson here, they'd accept me in Asgard. Now they say they

don't need pipers, so they won't let me in. I can't go back to Olympus, so it looks like I'll spend all eternity walking my one man picket line. Incidentally, I learned this routine in your world, Wilson. It's plenty clever, you know."

We left Pan and his sandwich sign and headed across the bridge to Asgard. A Valkyrie, one of the Norse warrior maids, was at the toll gate at the far end.

"Identify yourselves," she said. The gods were going modern. There was a telephone in the toll booth.

"I'm Johnny Wilson of Earth."

The Valkyrie looked at me with sudden interest. "The mortal who broke Hercules' leg? You don't look so tough, but I'd like to shake your hand, anyway." She shook. Her grip was like a pair of pliers. "Who's the lady?"

Before Diana could answer, I said, "Do you people want me to join you in Asgard? To become one of you?"

"And how, I'm not the final authority, you understand, but I'd say the man who broke Hercules' leg will always find a welcome here."

"Fine. Only, the girl goes with me."

"Who is she?"

"Her name is Diana, late of Olympus."

The Valkyrie almost hit the ceiling. She wanted to pounce on Diana but pounced on the telephone instead, saying: "Hello? This is the Bifrost Bridge guard. I've got a mortal name of Johnny Wilson here . . . yes, that's the one. And Diana of Olympus. Yes. Yes, sir."

She turned to us. "You wait," she said.

"For what?"

"Just wait."

Presently a horseman came galloping across the rolling green hills of Asgard toward the bridge. He reigned up and dismounted in one lithe, graceful motion. He wore royal purple and had a thin face with crafty eyes. "You're Wilson?" he said.

"Yes."

"And this is Diana?"

"Yes."

"I'm Loki. Maybe you heard of me."

Loki. Half-brother to the Norse Aesir. Part Aesir, part Utgard giant, trusted by neither and intriguer against both. According to Norse mythology, Loki and Thor always hated each other. The guile of one was pitted in the Eddas against the strength of the other.

"We heard of you," Diana said.

"Here's the setup," Loki told us. "Odin doesn't know you're here. Neither does my old enemy . . ."

"Odin?" I asked.

"Jupiter's opposite number in Asgard," Diana explained.

"Neither does Thor," Loki went on. Pan had brought his sandwich sign down to this end of the bridge and was listening to us while he walked his picket line. "I want to keep it that way," Loki continued. "Secret. Then I'll challenge Thor to a fight. The Thunderer will laugh. He always laughs at me. He rocks the sky with his laughter. Because he makes fun of me, he'll answer my challenge without his hammer, without his belt of strength, without his iron gloves. Then you do my fighting for me. Sounds terrific, doesn't it? You break Thor's leg like you broke Hercules', and throw him down to the Midgard Serpent. Is it a deal? If you accept, I'll make you the new Asgard Thunderer after I sit on Odin's right hand instead of Thor."

"What happens to Thor?" I asked.

"Oh, the Midgard Serpent will slay him."

I shook my head. "I've got

nothing against Thor. I don't want to kill him."

"It's either that or back where you came from," Loki told me.

"Don't trust him," Diana said. "Loki never carried out a bargain in his life."

"You're telling me," Pan sighed.

Loki noticed Pan for the first time. "I don't want that satyr hanging around the Bifrost Bridge," he said crisply. "I thought I told you."

The Valkyrie saluted and sallied forth after Pan. He darted around her and leaped into the saddle of Loki's horse. He sped away across the hills of Asgard.

"Stop him!" Loki cried.

But the Valkyrie tripped over Pan's sandwich sign. By the time she picked herself up and saddled another horse, Pan was almost out of sight. She spurred the horse and galloped off after him.

"Don't you see?" Loki said. "It was I who promised Pan admission to Asgard. Pan's mad now. He's going to tell Thor or Odin or both."

"Why did you bribe Pan to get rid of me if that's the case?"

"That's easy. If you had remained in Olympus, you'd have come here to fight Thor as their champion. I want you

to fight Thor as my champion. This was the only way."

"Loki would outfox his own mother," Diana warned me. "Don't listen to a thing he says."

"I'm a reformed man," Loki protested.

"I hear you said that before you had Baldur slain with the mistletoe, too," Diana pointed out.

"Forget it," I said. "We want admission to Asgard. I'll make you this promise, Loki: I won't tell Thor what you're planning. But I don't promise to kill him or even try."

Loki nodded. "That suits me. I'll arrange things so you have no choice." He bent down and examined Pan's sandwich sign. "Some clever idea," he said. "I'll have to look into its possibilities."

So saying, he led us across the hills of Asgard to Valhalla, where Odin resided. I had a hunch Pan would get there ahead of us.

Odin was a one-eyed man with a black patch where his right eye had been. He sat on his great throne with the wolves Geri and Freki at his feet. Frigga, his wife, sat on his left. Thor was on his right, talking to Pan when we got there.

"Don't believe a thing this Graeco-Roman satyr says," Loki said, approaching Odin's throne. The wolves Geri and Freki growled. Loki retreated. Frigga came forward and stroked Geri's muzzle with one hand, Freki's with the other. They stopped growling.

"Every pantheon must have its traitors," Odin said. "The Olympians have Pan, we have you, Loki. We won't believe anything Pan says; we won't believe anything you say, either."

Thor, meanwhile, had been listening to Pan. Now his great voice bellowed across the hall of Valhalla. "I have no fight with this mortal, this Johnny Wilson. Let him go in peace."

"I don't want to go. I can't go back to Earth."

"But you have no special talent we need here, young man," Frigga explained.

"He stays as my champion to fight Thor!" Loki cried.

"Thor doesn't fight hirelings of his brother gods," Odin said. "The man must be returned to Earth."

"Just a minute." This was Diana. She faced Odin coolly, ignoring Geri and Freki at his feet. "You know me?"

"Diana, the Graeco-Roman." There was no love in Odin's voice.

"As a member of the Graeco-Roman pantheon, I challenge Thor on behalf of Johnny Wilson. If Johnny wins, he can stay here in Asgard. If he loses . . ."

Diana and I knew exactly what would happen if I should lose.

Suddenly, Loki disappeared. He had been standing there before Odin's throne and now he was gone. Frigga clucked her tongue. "He's so petulant," she said. "When he's angered, he makes himself invisible, as if that will help."

At first, the words meant nothing. Then I started to think. The more I thought about it, the better I liked it. A wild plan, but I couldn't see myself being shuttled between Olympus and Asgard through this five-thousand day long night, waiting to be dropped back into the death chamber if I made a false move. It was a wild idea and it might make me the most unpopular man in both pantheons, including Loki, including Pan. Worst of all, it might make Diana hate me.

"She hasn't the authority to issue a challenge on my behalf," I said.

"Johnny!"

"It's true. I challenge Thor to battle, but not under the

colors of Olympus. I challenge Thor for Loki."

Loki became visible again. He was smiling.

"But only on one condition. Whether I win or lose, Loki gives me his power of invisibility."

Loki shrugged, still smiling. "Agreed."

Thor's laughter thundered across Valhalla. "I accept the challenge," he boomed. "So Loki has a whelp fighting for him, eh? Where's my hammer?"

"That's right," Pan said. "Use your hammer. He's tricky."

"Johnny Wilson," Diana said. "I hate you. You brought me here and now you're deserting me to . . . to . . ."

"I can't explain now," I said quickly. "Just believe me, that's all. I . . . I like you, Diana. I want you to know that."

She turned away from me coldly. Odin said, "We can arrange the fight for any day next week or the week after, unless either of the contestants would prefer another time."

I had to know how it would end. I couldn't sit around and wait. I had to prove my point to Diana. "Not next week," I said.

"He wants to delay the fight

and live a while longer," Thor boomed.

"When do you want to fight?" Odin asked me.

"Here and now," I said instantly.

Streaming across Bifrost Bridge and over the hills of Asgard came the Aesir, as if word of the coming battle flowed out across the land on an unseen tide. While the Valkyrie were marshalling them into the great spectator stands which fringe the amphitheater of Valhalla, Thor was conferring with Pan. The gnarled little satyr was telling him, probably, how I had bested Hercules with a strange new method of fighting.

The more he spoke, the less chance I'd have, for Thor was a mountain of a man, his biceps as big around as a normal man's thighs, his shoulders three feet across, his legs like columns of bedrock upon which the basalt continents sit. If he learned the barest rudiments of judo, I'd be through.

Diana was standing with Odin and the two white wolves, Geri and Freki. She wouldn't look at me, but I went around in front of her and grabbed her bare shoulders. I said, "With Loki's gift I may be able to prove my in-

nocence back on Earth. That's why, Diana."

"Truly?"

"Truly."

She nodded. She stared at me, searchingly. Then tears welled in her eyes. "You were lucky with Hercules. Thor will kill you."

"Not if he doesn't get a chance to learn judo."

Again Diana nodded. She turned haughtily to face Thor and called: "Does the Aesir God of Strength need council with a gnarled satyr to best a mortal? Are you really Thor, who does that?"

For answer, Thor's laughter boomed across the amphitheater of Valhalla, echoing from the rainbow spans of Bifrost Bridge and bouncing back upon us. Then Thor took his giant hammer in his hand, hefting it. I didn't know how heavy that hammer was, but the haft was three feet long and the head a foot across. Still laughing, Thor hurled it at me.

The hammer blurred at me, spinning end over end. I dove for the ground and could almost feel its passage in the air above my head. It went on and struck the stone wall behind me. A jagged crack twice a man's height sundered the wall. Then, with Thor's magic, the hammer turned and

fled back to his waiting hands, alighting there gently, haft-first!

I closed with him quickly. He wouldn't miss again with the hammer. At close quarters, he tossed the hammer aside, waiting with a smile on his lips. I brought my right hand up from the ground and bounced it off his jaw. My arm went numb to the elbow, but Thor merely grunted, shook the blow off, and went on laughing.

The wolves Geri and Freki growled. Otherwise, there was no sound but Thor's laughter as he came for me. I thought, this was a long way from the electric chair but death would be just as permanent.

Thor wrapped his arms about me, and squeezed. My breath caught in my throat. I could neither inhale it nor exhale it. There was a crunching sound and I knew I could do nothing but wait for my ribs to crack and the fight to end.

Then Thor made a mistake. He lifted me.

"Watch him!" Pan yelled.

My arms were free. I found Thor's eyes with my thumbs, and gouged. He dropped me and clawed at his face.

"The hammer," Diana said. "Use the hammer."

Well, Thor had tried to use

it. I ran for the hammer and tugged at the haft. Thor was lumbering toward me, still blinded. I couldn't lift the hammer!

I backed away warily, waiting for an opening. Thor came on, tripping over his hammer. He sprawled on the ground and lay there long enough for me to pounce on him and lift his great right arm up and back in a hammerlock. Thor howled.

All around us, the assembled Aesir howled with him. I wrenched the arm higher, but then Thor rolled over. Seven feet from toes to crown of head, three feet across the shoulders, three hundred pounds of rock-hard muscle. I stood up and got out of the way. His eyes were red and watery, but Thor could see now. His growl made Geri and Freki sound like lap dogs. His left fist traveled six inches, striking like a sledge against my chest. I sat down.

Thor came for me, confident now. I did a kip-up with my legs, catching his huge chest with my heels and letting his own weight and momentum flip him over on his back. He fell heavily, but scrambled to his feet, got the mighty hammer in his hand and swung it. This time it came close to

parting my hair. Thor still held it, swinging again. I scampered away, very unheroically.

"His belt of strength!" Loki hissed. "Here."

He placed a knife in my hand. I waited with it, then stepped inside the arc of his swing as Thor whipped the hammer around again. The belt of strength looked like a girdle at his waist. He held the hammer and wore the belt. He was not wearing his famous iron gloves. Hammer, belt and gloves—those were the sources of Thor's strength. I hacked at the belt with Loki's knife. I could see the metal fabric parting. A few seconds more. . . .

Thor tripped me. My head struck the hard ground and for the next few moments there were three Thors, wavering and indistinct, leaping down at me, securing their fingers about my throat, choking me. The fingers were steel. The three images became one, became Thor, choking the life from me.

I heard Diana's voice, far away. "Give up, Johnny! Tell him you've had enough. He'll kill you."

I kept on hacking at the belt of strength. I could hardly see it now, hardly feel the knife in my hand. There was a roaring

like the far pounding of surf in my ears.

The belt of strength parted.

Then Thor and I were rolling over and over, two mortals now. The one fighting for his name and his pride, the other fighting for his life. We stood up. We faced each other and smiled grimly and stood that way, slugging. Thor, the temporary mortal, sagged. I kept on punching, not seeing, not feeling anything, my hands numb, my arms heavy, almost too weary to raise. Diana came and stopped me, saying words I couldn't hear. Thor, minus his belt of strength, had been almost soft. He lay at my feet and the Aesir were howling for their old champion, but proclaiming their new one.

They'd never fete me, though. I whirled and faced Loki. "Give me the power of invisibility," I said.

"What's your hurry? We have to celebrate."

"I want it now."

"You ought to stick around and make certain they elevate me to Odin's right hand."

"I don't care if they do or not. The bargain was, I'd fight as your champion. In return, you give me the power of invisibility."

"It's strange, but I don't recall any bargain now. Perhaps

after you stay and help me I will."

Frigga was administering to Thor, who showed signs of regaining consciousness. Diana was watching me and Loki. Odin was looking at the fallen Thor and shaking his head sadly. I grabbed Loki's arm and yanked it up behind him. "I'll break it," I said.

"You're hurting me."

"The power of invisibility."

Loki reached up quickly with his free hand, taking a chain with a tiny pie-wedge shaped amulet dangling at its bottom from around his neck. "Here," he said. "You merely wish yourself invisible while wearing this."

I let him go. Cowering, he cringed away from me.

"Are you coming?" I asked Diana.

"Where?"

"Back to Earth. If I can find the proof I need, I'm staying there."

Diana came to me suddenly, not smiling. Very serious. "When Thor had you like that," she said, "his fingers choking you, I thought . . . I thought . . ."

"Hey, take it easy."

"You're a mortal and I'm a goddess, but . . ."

"If you live on Earth you'll be mortal too?"

"Yes."

"Diana, if I clear myself I'm asking you to marry me."

Diana laughed softly. At first I thought the idea was funny to her. I should have used my head. A mortal and a goddess. But she kissed me with the kiss of a goddess. It left me weaker than all of Thor's efforts. She said, still laughing, "It's just funny, that's all. I'm the goddess of the hunt. Chaste, unmarried, unmarriageable according to the old legends. I keep fair mortal women from falling into the trap of matrimony too soon. That's me, that's my job. Johnny, I don't care. I quit. I love you!"

Odin smiled on us and said, "All of Asgard is your home, mortal. Stay and live here with us."

I shook my head. "My world is Earth," I said.

"Then at least celebrate with us. You'll find Thor as gracious a loser as he is a winner, unless I don't know my own son."

Still, I shook my head. I waited only until Thor stood up, grinning sheepishly. "I should have depended more on my own strength and less on that belt," he admitted. "It was a fair fight and you won." We shook hands. Pan looked miserable. I guessed he would

be back inside his sandwich sign before too long. I said good-bye to Odin and Frigga and the Valkyrie maids. Diana patted the heads of Geri and Freki.

As the Valkyrie led us toward the Bifrost Bridge, gleaming with the colors of the rainbow ahead of us and spanning the gulf of infinity which separates Asgard from the mortal world, I fastened the amulet of invisibility around my neck. Diana found her skirt and blouse and climbed into them. She would need them where we were going. "Don't forget, Johnny," she warned me. "It will be the same as last time. If we slow down our time-rate, we can't speed it up at once if we have to. Minutes or sometimes hours must pass before we can be speeded up again."

I nodded grimly. I remembered last time, but there was not a thing we could do about it.

We crossed Bifrost Bridge and looked back. Asgard swam in pearly mists, was gone. The Earth awaited us.

"What is this place?" Diana asked me as we approached a great structure of stone and glass on the New Jersey side of the Hudson.

"To outsiders, a nightclub.

To those who know, a gambling establishment."

"You have friends here?"

"Friends," I said bitterly. "A man was killed here. Circumstantial evidence made it seem as if I were guilty. The one witness to the crime, the man who saw the actual killer, died of a heart attack before the trial. But he wrote a deposition. A statement."

"Saying what?"

"Saying what really happened. Two partners own this club, Diana. The deposition was given to one of them, a man named Robert Tolliver. The other one, Parker Hendrix, committed the murder in a fit or rage over a gambling debt."

We approached the gleaming glass door of the *Club Palisade*. A liveried lackey smiled professionally. "But if one partner has the evidence on the other," Diana asked me, "why doesn't he destroy it?"

"You don't know these people," I said. "Every month Tolliver has Hendrix sign over a percentage of the club. It's blackmail, with Hendrix hoping Tolliver will destroy the deposition when the club passes entirely into his hands. If I can get that deposition, it will prove that I'm completely innocent."

"So that's why you needed Loki's amulet."

"Yes," I said.

The doorman stood aside. He was there purely for ornamental purposes, for an electric eye opened the door as we neared it. Inside was soft mauve lighting, small, crowded tables, a handkerchief-sized dance floor wriggling with tight-packed couples doing the mambo and other things to the rhythm of an excellent Latin American band. I looked at my watch. Less than three hours had passed, Earth time, since I had been ushered into the execution chamber. It was now one fifteen, Friday morning.

"There is a wait for tables," the Maitre'd said.

"That's all right." I touched the amulet dangling from the chain and thought, *I want to be invisible*. I looked down. I couldn't see my arms, my legs, anything. I walked over to the cashier's window and reached in while a departing customer was paying his bill. I scooped several twenties from the drawer and thought they would be enough. Returning to Diana, I made myself visible again.

"Here's what I want you to do," I said. I explained the plan to her. When I finished,

she nodded. I added, "That's the only way I can think of to get in there where the deposition is."

I found the Maitre'd again, slipping him one of my twenty dollar bills. "We want to go in back," I said.

"In back?"

"Your memory is short. I've been here before."

"Well, you do look familiar."

"Familiar enough?"

"Frankly, no."

I gave him another twenty dollar bill.

"Now you look familiar enough," he said.

Still smiling professionally, the Maitre'd led us behind the bandstand. He knocked on a door, which presently opened. A big man in a tuxedo stood there. "They are all right," the Maitre'd said.

The door closed behind us. The great room we entered hummed with the sound of voices made soft by the sound-proofing on the ceiling. You could hear the chants, though, and the whispers of excitement, and you could see the tension at the dice tables, the tables for twenty-one and poker, the chuck-a-luck cage, and mostly at the big roulette wheel in the center of the floor, where a dozen pairs of

eyes followed the clicking ball around the spinning red and black wheel.

"You sure you know what to do?" I asked Diana.

"Yes, of course."

I made myself invisible and followed her to the roulette table. "Place your bets, please," the croupier was saying. He was smiling a house smile. A smile which said the wheel was reasonably honest but the odds were in the house's favor anyway and they couldn't lose.

Diana put down the remaining four twenty dollar bills and got four red chips for them. "Black seven," she said, and placed all four chips on the designated square.

Other chips were placed. The croupier nodded, spun his wheel. I moved in alongside Diana. She couldn't see me but squeezed my hand. The ball skipped from slot to slot on the spinning table, the red and black merging in gray. Then the wheel slowed, the ball bounced erratically. I waited until it had almost slowed to a stop, then lifted it with my invisible hand and placed it in black seven.

The croupier raked four large stacks of red chips in front of Diana. "Red twelve," she said, and placed them all there. A moment later, red

twelve was declared the winner. The croupier took out a silk handkerchief and dabbed at his neck with it. Gamblers can sense this sort of thing, because on the third spin almost everyone in the room had come to watch Diana's mountain of chips grow, and grow, and grow.

"Black five."

I picked the ball up and deposited it in black five.

"Five and black," said the croupier. He had no more chips now. He broke out a stack of hundred dollar bills and counted them off. Diana was smiling. Everyone looked happy but the croupier. They had all come here to win and had lost and now were receiving a vicarious thrill from Diana's success. The croupier was pale as he counted Diana's chips and paper money. "You have seventy-five thousand dollars," he said.

"Red sixteen," Diana told him.

"All of it?"

"All of it."

"You are sure, madam?"

"I am positive."

Diana would have nothing or over two million dollars on the next spin. People jostled one another as they crowded closer to watch. The croupier spun his wheel. The ball clicked and jumped. I had a bad

moment when a fat man, not seeing me, elbowed in front of me, blocking me from the table. I pushed him bodily out of the way and barely got the ball in time, depositing it in red sixteen. The fat man glared angrily at the man behind him. Everyone else was oo'ing and ah'ing.

The croupier was sweating from every pore. He had unloosened his bow tie and rumples his hair and stood there now, his hands trembling.

"Well," Diana said, "that's all. I'd like to cash in now."

The croupier whispered to her, "Madam, we don't have that kind of money in the club. You'll have to go in back and see the owner, who will write you a check."

"No check. Cash."

"Madam. . ."

"Let me see the owner, if you don't mind."

Looking pale, the croupier nodded. He raised his hand over his head, snapping his fingers. Two big men came over and stood by while the croupier wrote something out and handed it to Diana. "Go with them," he said. Diana did—and so did I. Invisible, of course.

The office was bare almost to the point of austerity. Two desks, two swivel chairs, sev-

eral filing cabinets. The round door of a safe was on the wall. Hendrix and Tolliver, the owners of the Club Palisade, were both there. They both knew me. They both had railroaded me to the chair, Hendrix to protect himself, Tolliver so he could keep right on blackmailing his partner.

"What's the trouble?" Tolliver said. He was a tall man, a John Wayne type but with a mustache. Hendrix was shorter, fatter, and sullen.

"I just won two million dollars on your lovely roulette wheel," Diana explained, handing Tolliver the note from the croupier. "I might add, I don't want a check, I'm sure you can understand why."

"Yes," said Hendrix. "Two million dollars. My God."

Tolliver shrugged. "We can scrape it together. When do you want it, Miss?"

Diana frowned. "You're joking, of course. I want it right now. If you don't want to pay, I'll call in all those people out there who. . ."

"Call off," Tolliver said. "In a case like this, it's customary to make a settlement for an immediate cash payment. Say, a million dollars?"

"Say, a million and three quarters?"

"One and a half?"

"All right," Diana said. "But right now."

Tolliver nodded. Hendrix breathed a sigh of relief. The firm had been saved half a million dollars. Tolliver crossed the bare floor to the wall safe while the two men who had ushered Diana to the office waited near the door. Invisible, I followed Tolliver.

Tolliver spun the dials, saying over his shoulder. "We ought to have a drink on this. I still don't know how you did it. But the *Club Palisade* will pay off, of course."

"Naturally," Diana said.

At last Tolliver swung the handle. The safe door held for a moment, then swung out toward him. There were two compartments, one stacked with money in large denominations, the other with envelopes. Tolliver took out stacks of money and began to count them, his back to the safe. I hoped he would hide what was going on from the others' view. I reached in and began to go through the envelopes.

They were legal papers mostly. Contracts, bills of sale, corporate papers. I found a plain manilla envelope with the word Hendrix written on it in Tolliver's bold handwriting.

"Hey!" Hendrix called.

Tolliver whirled and faced the safe.

What he saw was an envelope floating out toward him, suspended on air, apparently under its own volition. He lunged for it, his finger catching in the chain about my neck. The slender links parted. The chain and amulet fell to the floor.

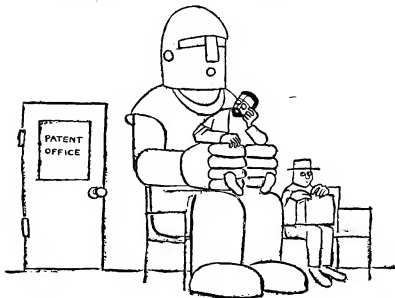
"Where'd he come from?" Hendrix yelled.

Diana screamed. I clutched the envelope and yelled back at her, sprinting for the door. Tolliver and Hendrix looked very white. "That's Johnny Wilson!" Tolliver cried.

One of the men at the door had drawn a .38 revolver from his shoulder holster. I barrelled toward him, Diana right behind me. I dove for the floor and pulled Diana down with me as the weapon was fired.

Tolliver took the slug in the chest and tumbled forward across his desk. I got up and drove my knee into the groin of the man with the gun. He groaned and collapsed there. I got the gun from his fingers but the other man had Diana, holding her about the waist while she kicked wildly.

"You get out of here,



Johnny," she cried loudly.

I shook my head. "The speed-up?" I asked hopefully.

Still struggling with the *Club Palisade* hood, Diana gasped, "I . . . I'm trying. It's too soon. It . . . doesn't work."

I slammed the revolver at the face of the man who had now pinned Diana to the floor. I could feel the bone and cartilage crunch. I tumbled him off Diana while he held his ruined face. Hendrix came running across the room after us, but by then we were outside in the gambling casino—and running.

We bolted through the *Club Palisade* and outside to the parking lot. Hendrix was behind us with some of his thugs, but I didn't settle for any car. I was searching for one they couldn't catch. I found it at last, a brand new Cadillac 60 Special, with enough power under its hood to get away from anything on wheels except a hotrod.

We jumped in. Figures appeared briefly in the glare of the headlights as I gunned the motor. A pistol shot roared. The windshield exploded violently, but then we were on our way with the shouts fading behind us.

I kept the accelerator pedal to the floor all the way up the Storm King Highway toward

Albany. The Governor would be waiting there in his mansion for word from Sing Sing.

As we drove, Diana read the dead man's deposition to me. It would clear me completely and put Hendrix in the death chamber in my place.

"Mind being married to a mortal?" I asked Diana.

"I'll be a mortal too. I think I'm going to like your Earth, Johnny. You've certainly given me enough action for one night."

We entered Albany. We drove to the Governor's mansion. The man at the gate wouldn't believe me when I told him who I was. The Governor looked, and believed.

He worried his trim mustache with the pinky finger of one hand while I told my story. I handed him the deposition and watched him read it.

"Does it clear me?" I said.

"It will, as soon as it can go through the courts."

We shook hands. "I want something else, too," I said.

"Mr. Wilson, the People of the State of New York owe you plenty for this. Just name your request."

I squeezed Diana's hand. I smiled down at her. "Do you perform marriage ceremonies?" I asked the Governor.

THE END

FINAL CURTAIN

BY ARNOLD MARMOR

Any city dweller who tries roughing it in the depths of the untracked forest has to learn to find water, locate food, cure snake-bite—and perhaps match wits with visitors from Outer Space!

“WHY, you wouldn’t last a week, much less two solid months,” Paul Harte said, pouring rum over cracked ice. “A splash of soda?”

“Straight, please.” Vincent Knox lifted the glass given to him, said, “To two wonderful months in the woods,” and drank.

“You’ll come crawling back on your hands and knees,” Paul Harte promised. “You’ll starve for the noise and lights. You’ll be back.”

“Two months of fishing and hunting.”

“What do you know about fishing and hunting?”

“I’ll find out.” Vincent Knox finished his drink. He stood up, a tall lean man with a high forehead. He was a stage director. “I wish you’d come with me, Paul.”

“Not on your life,” said one of Broadway’s biggest producers. “I once ventured out of

the city to a place called Hoboken. Made a call on a young lady. She turned out to be married. A brute of a husband. I still carry the scars. I was taught a lesson then. Always stay in my own backyard.”

“What inane logic,” Vincent Knox said.

“I’d miss the city, the lights and the women. If you were going instead to Chicago or Los Angeles then maybe I’d tag along.”

“I’m going some place where I can rest. I want to breathe fresh air. I want to see green grass and tall trees.”

“Which play is that from?”

“Country Song.”

“I thought so.”

“You’re sure you won’t come?”

“Sure. Absolutely. But you will be back within a week.”

“Don’t bet on it.”

"Why not? I'd even bet a thousand dollars."

"Why, that's crazy."

"Is it? I'll bet five thousand."

"You must've spiked your own drink."

"Are you afraid I might be right?" There was a sly grin on Paul Harte's face.

"If I thought you were serious about betting—"

"But I am! Five thousand?"

"That I stick out a week?"

"You were going for two months, remember?"

"You said I'd be back within a week, remember?"

"All right then. A week. Five thousand says you don't stick to it a full week."

They shook hands on it. Then they drank to it.

It was the second day at the shack when the two visitors arrived. They stood over the director's bed and watched him sleep for awhile. Then one of them shook Vincent Knox's shoulder.

The director mumbled and opened his eyes. Then he sat up, blinking.

The two visitors had on space suits. They were both short broad men. One of them took a helmet which encased his head and laid it on a table. He was completely

bald. Not a hair on his face. Even his eyebrows—or where eyebrows should be—was void of a single hair.

"Who—who are you?" Knox asked, his voice suddenly thick with fright.

"I am Sando," said the one who had removed his helmet. "This is Goro."

"You—you're not—"

"We are from another planet," Sando said.

"You speak English?"

"We speak all languages."

"But—but what are you doing here?"

"We cannot make ourselves known," Sando said. "Not for the present."

Goro removed his helmet. His features were almost the same as Sando except his nose was much flatter against his face.

"You—you look human," Knox said.

"Did you think we would be monsters?" Sando asked, amused.

Goro suddenly jumped. "What's that?" He pointed at a blurry streak.

"A rat," Knox said. "The shack is full of them."

"There is no such thing on our planet," Goro said.

"Why did you come here?" Knox wanted to know.

"The conquest of Earth," Goro said. "We are the first."

"Goro!" Sando said sharply. "You betray our mission."

"It does not matter," Goro said. "This one has but a short time to live."

Vincent Knox shivered.

"That is true," Sando said. "No one must know we are here."

"I feel the pang of hunger clawing through me," Goro said.

"You!" Sando turned to Knox. "Prepare food."

"I'll be hanged if I cook for you," Knox cried.

"You would die now?"

"You have no weapons."

Goro reached inside his suit and brought out a queer-looking gun. "A blast from this will blacken your body."

"Will you prepare food?" Sando asked.

"All right," Knox sighed wearily.

Paul Harte opened his door and beamed. "Come in, come in." He stepped aside as Vincent Knox hurried into the room. Paul Harte closed the door. "I'll build a couple of drinks."

Vincent Knox sank down on the divan, his head rolling from side to side against the back of the divan.

"Here," Harte said.

Knox drank like a man in great thirst.

Paul Harte suddenly roared with laughter.

"What's funny?" Knox demanded sharply.

"Your face. What a scare the boys must have given you."

"The boys?" Sudden understanding dawned on Vincent Knox's face. "I see."

Paul Harte suddenly stopped laughing.

"It was done beautifully," Vincent Knox said.

"A couple of space suits hired out from a costume shop. Two toy rocket guns. And two actors from out-of-town."

"They gave a great performance," Knox said.

"All they had to do was shave their heads and eyebrows. But they weren't to let you escape till tomorrow. Don't tell me you got away on your own?"

"Oh, yes," Knox said. "It was rather easy. They're dead, you see."

"What?" Paul Harte stared at Knox.

"Rat poison," Knox said. "I put it in their food. They insisted I cook for them."

Paul Harte continued staring at Knox. The ice in his glass made sweat form on the outside of the glass. It ran down the length of the glass and onto his hand. **THE END**

PLAGUE PLANET

BY IVAR JORGENSEN

Certain death was every man's lot as the Green Plague swept the world into a common grave. But that was before a coward and a fool tried to escape in a sabotaged spaceship. . . .

"IT WOULD appear," Mallory said, "that chaos is the order of the day." He stood at the window of the Carlton penthouse, looking down into the dark heart of Manhattan. A few street lights still burned, but they were the exception rather than the rule. The big, blazing neons of Times Square had been off for many nights.

"Your folks have all taken off for Luna? All your relatives?" The question came lazily from where Terry Parnell lounged in an easy chair with a bourbon and soda in his hand.

"Oh, yes. Aunt Helen and her family left Bridgeport this afternoon. That makes a clean sweep."

"Can't understand why you didn't go with them."

Mallory continued to stare down forty-three floors into the dark canyons below. He laughed, not with humor, but with an odd nervousness; almost like a child, Terry thought; a child on its first visit to the zoo. Mallory said, "The spirit of adventure in me, I guess. Didn't want to miss the show. Can't you imagine what's going on down there—and all over the world? It's—well, fascinating."

"Yes," Terry said, in the same lazy voice. "The ones who fear death are cringing in dark corners awaiting the inevitable. Those who don't give a damn are roaming the streets, killing, raping, looting, getting drunk—having the time of their lives."

Mallory shivered. "I'll bet



The girl offered no resistance as the two young men calmly set about tearing off her clothing.

as many are dying from violence as from the plague. I wish it were possible to go down and walk among them—safely, that is. What sights there are to be seen! What stories to take to Luna!”

“I have no urge to do that,” Terry said. “I came too close to the actuality. If I hadn’t been lucky enough to find you still here—and with a ship of your own—I’d probably be down there with them right now.”

Mallory turned from the window and came over and poured himself a drink. “You certainly took a big risk, old man—not jetting off from Newark with the rest of your clan—”

“It wasn’t from choice I can tell you. No adventurous spirit kept me here. I didn’t make the port in time, and with the mobs moving in, they just had to go off and leave me.”

“You were lucky to find the monocopter.”

“I was lucky to have gone to school with you, too; and lucky to have seen your light up here.”

Mallory smiled and clapped his college friend genially on the shoulder. “Well you were certainly welcome, old man. When you set down, I was getting a bit lonesome. Guess I was regretting my foolish-

ness. I’ll be glad to have you aboard.”

There was a moment of dead silence while the cool night breeze stopped and the palm leaves in the patio hung motionless. And, timed to this moment, a thin, desperate scream rose from the street below, to die in a sound of choked agony.

“Some poor female getting—”

“—whose luck ran out,” Terry said sharply. He was vaguely annoyed at what sounded almost like relish in Mallory Carlton’s voice.

Mallory laughed and lowered his eyes. “Guess the mad abandon of the times is getting me. Of course, if we could do anything for her, we would.”

“Oh, certainly,” Terry said. “And by the way—don’t you think it’s about time we jetted off ourselves? Where is your ship, anyhow?” The thought of the suffering, the violence, the pattern of animalism down below, dampened his mood, and he was reacting in the only way a member of the fortunate wealthy class could react. Get away from it. Flee from unpleasantness. Turn away from those not so lucky.

Of course, wealth had not been the deciding factor in

this world tragedy. There were plenty of rich people down there—and all over the world—taking their chances—dying right along with the poor.

Only the wealthy who were within the select inner circle were the lucky ones. Those in touch with the industrial, scientific, and political powers who had foreseen the catastrophe and prepared the haven on Luna.

The vast pattern of treachery, intrigue, and manipulation behind the project would have filled a dozen volumes. First, the scientists and chemists had discovered and classified the plague that would rise up out of the earth as a result of vast misuse of atomic knowledge. Then, through political channels, the industrial leaders had been contacted and, as a result, the Lunar development program had been quietly given new direction. Thus were the Lunar havens built.

But it had not been easy. Masterminding born of desperation and the urge for survival had sparked the undercover activities that had bridged racial and international hatreds and rivalries.

Certain Russian leaders, while publicly shouting for war, had been secretly meet-

ing with English, French, American leaders, and also those from other nations in a hypocritical liaison for individual survival.

Thus, a minority worked for its own safety, and its pattern of operation had been composed of doubletalk, half-truth, outright lie and—when necessary—systematic murder. Leaders allowed on the inside had to be screened carefully because there were a distressing number of honest and sincere men in every nation and in every branch of endeavor. Naturally, if the screening board made a mistake, those entrusted with the vital work of assassination had to correct it.

So the tight, inner organization had been formed and was a monumental success. So much so that even when the advance guard of those billions who would die, began dropping off, the inner-circle was ready to vacate the plague planet.

And the final phase of the operation had been carried out with amazing success. On the night when the President of the United States died of the dread green plague, the last contingents of lucky ones jetted off from Newark and Bridgeport.

"How many do you think

got away to Lunar?" Terry asked.

Mallory glanced down in surprise. "Why, the entire fifty thousand, or close to it," he said. "But I'm afraid you're mind's wandering, old man. You asked where my ship is and I don't think you heard me when I gave you the answer."

Terry laughed. "No, I didn't."

"In a cove near our Nantucket place. Well hidden. No one will find it, so there's really no rush. We're above the contamination range."

"But what if people start climbing up here?"

Mallory smiled. "That's been taken care of. The elevators were wrecked and all the doors sheathed tight. They'd have to blast their way up and there would be no reason to."

"Hmmm," Terry said, vaguely. "Everything was certainly taken care of, wasn't it? Not a detail missed."

"Of course," Mallory said. "That's the reward for having brains and resources."

"And being a chosen one—"

Mallory slapped him again on the shoulder. "That's right. We lucky ones must stick together now. What say we head for the kitchen and have

something to eat before we go?"

"All right."

As they left the patio, Mallory said, "Blast it! I wish they'd have figured out a vaccine for the plague before they left."

"So the world could have been saved?"

"No. Then we could go down and wander around and see some of the sights. Lord! A city gone mad must really be something to see!"

"I'm satisfied as things are," Terry said. "Let's eat."

An hour later, they were on the 'copter platform, ready to head for Nantucket. Mallory said, "We'll use your 'copter. Wait a minute."

He ran to his own 'copter and was back in a few moments. Terry asked, "What did you do?"

"Wrecked it, of course. Pulled some parts out of the motor and threw them over the edge."

"Smart," Terry said. "We mustn't give anyone a break."

Any inflection in his voice was missed by his companion.

Mallory's jet was a aqua job; a three-man rocket with cobalt fission—fueled to make Lunar ten times over. In the pilot room, Terry studied the

multiple controls and said, "How did you figure on handling this ship alone? Even with the two of us, it will be tough."

"Nonsense. It's all practically automatic and the course is already charted and photographed on the tape. One of us just has to keep awake to see that nothing goes wrong."

"What's it set for?"

"Eleven and a half hours. We'll get overhead and then split it into six-hour watches. No need of losing sleep now that we're a team."

"Fine." Terry sat beside Mallory and watched as the latter jockeyed the rocket out into open water. He felt the acceleration as Mallory touched a button and a white-hot rocket tail bloomed out behind, boiling the water around it and leaving a wake of rising steam as the rocket idled out toward the point of integration.

Mallory, after getting the ship in motion, snapped on the automatic pilot and the microsecond timer took over to veer course seven degrees for interplanetary angle, raise the nose gradually for orbital range, and raise speed imperceptibly for correct meeting of all three.

Forty minutes later, Mallory smiled and yawned.

"Everything shipshape," he said. "Want to catch yourself a little sleep?"

"You look as though you need it worse than I do. Suppose I take the first watch."

"All right, if you say so." Mallory got up from his seat and looked out the port. "Poor old Earth," he said. "How does the saying go? It sowed its own seeds of destruction."

"I guess that's about it. Nothing to do here unless the gauges and dials go wrong?"

"No. Just see that they stay off the red. If there's trouble, call me."

"Fine. There probably won't be."

Mallory left the pilot cabin and Terry lay back in his chair and closed his eyes. The light still bothered him, so he lowered the bulbs until there was only a soft yellow glow in the cabin.

His thoughts were mixed. The exodus had been a great success; a triumph of man's resourcefulness and ingenuity. Of course, only a fragment of mankind had been saved; but after all, the impossible could not be accomplished. In matters such as these the basic law—survival of the fittest—came into play. Regardless of man's progress, the laws of the jungle still prevailed.

Terry felt he should be

happy as a part of the exodus—thankful at being one of the lucky ones. But somehow he felt a little guilty about it all—as though he had betrayed his own kind. He thought of what was going on back in Manhattan—in London, Moscow, Paris, Lisbon. In the cities and the towns and in the rural areas—all over the earth. He remembered the woman's scream that had drifted up to the penthouse. Truly, the law of the jungle was universal, so why should he feel guilty? The people down there would kill him and take his place if they could. The hell with it! He would go to Lunar and enjoy his survival along with the rest. Soon all this would be but a memory.

He yawned, opened his eyes, saw that four of the gauges had swung far over into the red sections of the dials. He sprang from his chair and turned up the lights. "Mallory!" he yelled.

Sweat poured off Mallory's face. There was fear in his eyes. "I don't understand it. Everything seems to be okay and yet the ship isn't acting right. We're going into a tight arc."

Desperately, he clawed among the controls. But his

efforts served only to greaten the error of flight into which the ship had fallen.

"Better keep your hands off them!" Terry said sharply. "If you don't know what you are doing, you'll only make it worse."

"But what can be wrong? It never acted like this before."

"Are you sure the tape is feeding in right?"

"The tape?" Burdened by sudden fear, Mallory's mind had dulled and his reactions slowed.

"The tape in the monopilot where the trip-guide is photographed."

"Oh—oh, yes." Mallory snapped the lid off the bright chromed box and peered inside where the tape should have been unreeling in concert with all the other pilot mechanisms.

"Is it okay?"

"Good God, no! Look!"

Terry leaned over Mallory's shoulder and looked into the box. On the surface of the tape, he could see the long, irregular scratches as though from a fingernail.

"Sabotage!" Mallory gave a groan. "Someone found the ship! Some dog-in-the-manger who couldn't fly it himself and didn't want anybody else to be safe." Mallory turned to

Terry with tears starting from his eyes. "Who could have been so mean—so cruel? Isn't there any decency left in the world?"

A feeling of distaste flared in Terry. "Relax! You're jumping at conclusions. It looks like carelessness to me."

"It's not. It was one of those stupid clods down there who didn't want anyone else to live if he couldn't!"

"Well, what difference does it make now? Whatever the cause, the damage is done."

"And with no scout ships to find us, we'll arc through space until we die!"

"I don't think so. It doesn't appear to me that we're out of the gravitational pull yet."

"That's almost as bad! It means we'll go back down and crash!"

Terry couldn't resist a jibe. "Then you'll get your wish."

"What wish?"

"Didn't you say you'd like to see what's going on down there?"

"That's a pretty rotten thing to say—"

"I'm sorry, but let's face facts. I'm pretty sure we're rocketing right back to Earth."

"In God's name! What can we do?"

Terry felt a surge of pity as he saw the stark terror in

Mallory's eyes. "We'll just do the best we can," he said. "I think it would be a good idea to put on pressure suits."

"What good will that do?"

"It might lessen the shock of the crash. That is, if we're lucky enough to keep from hitting head-on. In that case, the ship will explode and it won't make any difference."

The terror in Mallory's eyes increased. "Explo— don't say that! Don't even think it!"

"Stop being childish! We've got to face it."

Mallory stumbled to a cabinet nearby and opened it to reveal three crash suits. He pulled two off their hooks and handed one to Terry. Then he fumbled with the hooks and zippers on the one he'd kept.

"I'll help you," Terry said, with some contempt. "Didn't you ever get into a suit before?"

"Of course, man! But I'm scared. I'm scared sick and I don't care who knows it."

Terry helped him in silence, then got into his own suit.

And now there was nothing to do but wait. They sat, two grotesque, helpless figures, waiting for what would come. Terry was able to combat his own fear by visualizing, and pitying Mallory. He knew what Mallory was going

through—the agony of mind—and his own difficulties seemed lightened in comparison.

After a while, they got up as one man and looked out the port. Dawn had come to the western hemisphere and they could see the mottled globe of Earth growing as they rushed toward it.

"Better not look," Terry said.

"But I want to see," Mallory replied. "Guess that's always been my big weakness—curiosity. Always wanted to see what was going on."

"Sometimes curiosity is good."

"When I was at school I used to sneak out once in a while and walk the streets just to see what the other half was up to."

Mallory was obviously trying to stifle his terror by pushing it aside. Terry reached out and laid a clumsy, gloved hand on his arm. "Maybe we'll be lucky," he said.

"Maybe."

Twenty minutes later, Terry said, "Better fasten your helmet."

Mallory was surprised. "Why do that? We're in an oxygen zone."

"I was thinking that we might hit water. Then we'll

need the oxygen in our units until we surface. This rocket could dive two miles down into the ocean."

"You're right. We'd need a lot of pressure, too, in that case."

"Set it as high as you can."

The crash came suddenly, before they realized it was imminent. The Earth seemed a long distance away. Then it bulged up abruptly in front of the port and Terry had only time to raise an arm before the dreaded contact was made.

He never knew quite what happened. There was a blur of retching pain; a mental blackout; chaos of the body, the mind, of all creation—then nothing.

After what seemed ages, Terry's mind cleared and he realized he had—instinctively or otherwise—hit the automatic hatch control and that the mechanism had worked.

He and Mallory had been thrown some distance from the point of crash and he could see the ship, half buried in the slime and ooze where it had crashed.

We came down in a swamp, he thought. His first reaction was a feeling of thanksgiving. But this soon became tempered with anxiety as the

problems of the moment asserted themselves.

A swamp. Quicksand, possibly, and two men—helpless in bulky pressure suits—bogged in the center of it. The suits would protect them all right, but to what advantage as they were sucked under the mire? It would preserve them only for a horrible slow death by suffocation.

Buried alive!

The irony of it struck him as he noted the ooze had pulled him in over his hips and was rapidly crawling higher. A short distance away, Mallory was even more helpless, the deadly mire of the swamp almost up to his armpits.

What a colossal joke! They'd boarded a ship and set out for the moon. They'd ridden to the skies on the crest of man's inventive genius—only to end up trapped in mire beneath the surface of the very planet from which they'd sought to escape.

Terry laughed. There was hysteria in the laughter, and perhaps the sound of it was what cleared his mind, because he saw now that Mallory would not die a long, agonizing death in the swamp ooze. The glass shield of Mallory's helmet was broken and he was sinking lower and

lower as the mud pulled at his suit.

With effort born of supreme desperation, Terry tore loose from the grip of the swamp by throwing himself headlong toward Mallory. Lying thus, prone on the mud, the buoyancy of his suit exerted some effect. It lifted enough to clear his feet and he lunged again toward his trapped companion. Five tearing strides brought him near enough to give aid, but what form the aid would take was another matter.

He could not even begin to pull Mallory loose from the ooze-grip. If he tried, he would only succeed in miring his own bulky suit beyond hope of salvation.

A single long chance remained, and Terry went swiftly to work on the shoulder plates of Mallory's suit. Either the clasps were stuck or his own efforts were impeded by panic, because the clasps refused to give.

Then Terry, with sharp, mental effort, steadied his mind. Take it easy, he told himself. This is routine. Any fool can lift a shoulder piece from a pressure suit. It's built to be lifted. The calming effort paid off, and in a few moments—just when the ooze was ready to flow into the

smashed helmet—Terry lifted it away; driving himself six inches down into the mire in so doing.

"Okay, boy," he said. "Lift yourself out. Haul up and leave the suit. Climb! Climb out of it."

Mallory, sick with terror, looked at him dully, until Terry reached over and slapped his face. This seemed to bring him back. In sudden desperation, he began climbing out of the pressure suit, clearing it just as the released air allowed the swamp to press it flat together.

Terry put his arm around Mallory's shoulders and said, "Okay, let's go ashore. Easy does it. Lay out flat and roll. Don't fight too hard. Take it slow."

They lay on the swamp edge, in the long grass where they had been fighting off exhaustion, getting their breath back, beginning again to live.

"Where are we?" Mallory asked, struggling to a sitting position.

"Does it matter?" Terry asked. "We're alive. That's the important thing."

"Uh-huh, but I want to know where we are. I want to look around."

Terry smiled weakly. "Still curious, eh? There are some

peculiar traits in you, Mallory. Anybody else would be satisfied just to be alive, but you want to know how it happened."

Mallory looked at his friend, an odd expression on his face. "We *did* almost die, didn't we?"

"That's a fact."

Mallory turned and looked thoughtfully across the swamp. "Terror is a funny thing," he said.

"What's funny about it?"

"I—I don't quite know. The way it works, I guess. I remember being so scared I was sick."

"It was natural to be scared."

"I suppose so, but I can't help thinking that maybe the agony of the fear was worse than the agony of dying would have been."

"That's a strange thing to say."

Mallory laughed a little sheepishly. "I guess you're right, but strange things have been happening to us. Maybe that accounts for it."

"Could be."

"Where do you think we are?"

"I'm not sure, but I've got a hunch we're somewhere south on the Atlantic seaboard."

"Virginia? The Carolinas?"

"Further south, maybe. Doesn't look like Florida, though."

"Well, let's start walking and see where we come out. You feel up to it?"

"I'm up to it, but I wonder if it's the smart thing to do."

"What do you mean?"

"Wherever we go, we're going to walk into the plague. At least this place is isolated—or seems to be. They never did find out whether the green death is contagious, but it seems to me our odds of survival are better by not going among people we might catch it from."

Mallory looked out to where the jet tip of the space rocket was just disappearing under the mud of the swamp. In the dead silence it went down with a sudden sucking sound, as though the swamp were smacking its lips at the taste of this sizable prize. Then the mud settled over the spot, leveled out, and there was nothing.

Mallory shuddered. "There, but for the grace of God, went you and I."

"Where did you hear that?"

"Read it somewhere. In an old book."

Terry scowled. "I wonder if we should be proud of ourselves?"

Mallory turned sudden eyes

on his companion. "What do you mean by that?"

"We're kind of a miserable pair in more ways than one, aren't we."

Obviously Mallory did not understand. He shrugged and said, "I still vote for hiking out of here. I want to see where we are—what's going on."

It was Terry's turn to shrug. "Okay. We might just as well die of the plague as starve to death. Let's go."

It was eleven o'clock by Terry's wristwatch as they started off through the growth directly away from the swamp. They traveled for two hours, coming upon nothing but a repetition of what had gone before. The hours passed. They kept driving doggedly eastward, and it was three o'clock when they came to the first sign of civilization: an overgrown, twin-rutted road winding through the trees.

"Looks like we're getting something," Mallory said.

"About time. Let's stop and rest a while."

"No, let's keep on going and see what we find."

Shaking his head wearily, Terry followed his companion along the old road.

"Doesn't appear to have

been used for a long time," Terry said, some ten minutes later.

"There may not be a soul within miles, but we ought to find out."

But there was someone quite close, because, at that moment, a scream sounded through the trees, startling both men and jerking them alert.

"A woman," Terry said.

"And not far away."

"She's in trouble."

"It's on ahead—straight down the road." And Mallory was off at a run. Terry followed, both of them sprinting down the overgrown road to where it fed abruptly into a paved, two-lane highway. There was a line of trees close to the highway, with the road slanting sharply down to the concrete, and both men popped out of the trees so suddenly, they had to skid back on their heels to bring themselves to a halt.

The scene of the trouble was directly in front of them. An incredibly ancient automobile stood on the highway. Terry thought that that model had been extinct for years but, evidently, here in the back country, old cars were still functioning.

Beside the car were three figures, a girl and two men.

The girl had long black hair and wore a gingham dress. The men—each holding one of her arms, wrestled with her and appeared to be trying to drag her toward the trees.

They were bearded, dirty, evil-looking, and when the two newcomers jumped into sight, they stopped what they were doing and stood staring.

The girl took advantage of the opportunity. She pulled away and cowered against the side of the car.

Terry stopped and stood alert and waiting. But Mallory, without hesitation, lunged at the kidnapers. Caught off-guard as they were, he was able to get close and smash a fist into the face of the taller one before anyone knew quite what had happened.

"Come on," Mallory yelled. "Get this scum!" He slammed a fist into the tall man's stomach, doubling him over. Then he kicked the man in the face.

The man squalled in pain and backed away, as Mallory swung at the second man. Terry had come alive now, and was moving in. The second man, upon seeing his friend routed and he himself facing two enemies, broke and ran. The injured man wiped

the blood from his face, fell down, got up again, and began running also. Soon they were out of sight among the trees.

Mallory rubbed his knuckles in satisfaction. "The thing to do is attack fast," he explained, grinning. "That's half the battle. Hit them before they know you're around."

The girl said, "Thanks for—for helping me. I don't know what I'd have done without you."

She was pretty—fair game for a pair of mauraunders in times like these. "What are you doing here?" Mallory asked.

"There's a camp near here—just outside Lawrenceville, where they help people with the plague. I was going there, but the car broke down and those men came out of the woods."

"What's your name?" Mallory asked.

"Helen Davis."

"Why were you going to this camp? I'd think you'd want to stay as far away from the plague as you could."

"My father and mother died of it yesterday—back on the farm—so there was no reason for my staying there. I thought maybe I could help at the camp." She had clear

blue eyes and brown hair that hung down over her shoulders. Terry hadn't seen hair like that in a long time: hair allowed to lie naturally. In his circle, the women seemed to compete with each other for new and outlandish hairdos.

Helen Davis asked, "Were you two heading for the camp also?"

Terry introduced himself and Mallory and then said, "Not exactly. Our ship came down in a swamp back there and to tell the truth, we're lost. You're the first person we've talked to since we crashed."

"That's Mogul Swamp. A bad place to get lost in. You were lucky to get out."

Terry asked, "You say your car broke down?"

"It just stopped. I don't know what's wrong with it."

Mallory walked over and lifted the hood. Terry followed him. They looked inside. Mallory said, "Got any idea how these things work?"

"Not the slightest." Terry fooled with a few wires and then said, "Get in and kick the starter."

Mallory did so, but there was no response. "Guess it just died a natural death."

"The camp is only about two miles down the road,"

Helen Davis said, "We can walk."

Terry and Mallory looked at each other. Helen caught the look and spoke with uncertainty. "That is—if that's where you planned to go."

"I think not—" Terry said.

"I think so," Mallory cut in decisively. "I'd like to see what's going on."

It was a hot day and the pavement burned through the soles of their shoes. Helen walked between the two men and Mallory asked, "What—what happens when this plague hits? I've been wondering—"

"Shut up!" Terry said sharply. "She said her parents—"

"Oh, that's all right," the girl said, dully. "It's not—not so bad any more. The edge of horror wears off after you've seen a lot of people die."

"It's all right if you don't want to talk about it," Mallory said.

"You haven't seen any victims of the green plague?" She spoke with wonder and surprise.

"Well, no—you see we've been—"

She stared straight as they walked, her face expressionless. But Mallory could see

that this was only a mask covering deep-down horror. "It's not a bad death, really," she said. "They just get tired—very tired—and have to sit down. There is sort of a buzzing inside them—that's how it's been described—and somehow their bones seem to shake loose. Then they grow pale and weaken until they can't move."

"But the green—" Mallory began.

"That comes later, toward the end. They turn green all over and the pain starts. When they begin hurting, death always comes within half an hour. That's what I meant when I said it isn't a bad death. It's so—so swift."

"It must be horrible," Terry said grimly.

"After they die, their bodies are very limp—that's the mysterious part of it. Their bones turn to jelly as though the stiffness had all been burned out."

"I've heard no one ever recovers from it," Mallory said.

"That's right. As soon as the weariness hits—and the weakness—you just lie and wait for the end. The Green Fire—some of the people around here call it."

"And no one has discovered what causes it?"

"It has something to do

with radiation? You see, years ago, when they began making atom bombs, the waste materials from the uranium ore was buried in various places around the country. Some of it had a half-life of thousands of years. They think the disease is some kind of a poison rising from those wastes."

"Is it contagious?" Mallory asked.

"No one knows. My folks died of it but, as yet, I haven't felt any symptoms."

"You've had a pretty rotten time of it," Terry said.

"No more so than others." She smiled without humor. "At least I'm still alive. That's supposed to be good."

Mallory put a hand on her arm and said, "Take it easy. Things have got to get better."

"They say the Earth will be completely depopulated."

Terry said, "How can they know that when they don't know anything about the disease? Who can say for sure what will happen?"

Mallory was about to reply when the attack came.

The two strangers had evidently not given up after all. Obviously, they'd moved quietly along the edge of the road awaiting a fresh chance

and had decided that this was it.

They jumped swiftly into view, each one carrying a stout club and they tried to get in telling blows before Terry and Mallory could get set.

The tall one swung a vicious blow at Terry, but the latter managed to turn away and take it on his shoulder. The falling club struck his arm but completely missed his head.

Mallory sidestepped the second club as it came over in a vicious down-smash. The club hit the ground, leaving the thug off-balance, and Mallory kicked him squarely in the face.

Blood spurted, and the man screamed in pain and rage. Mallory moved in swiftly and swung his fist at the man's head. He connected at the base of his skull and felt his knuckles go numb at the impact.

The man went down, flat on his face, groveling in the dirt at the edge of the road, and Mallory turned to see Terry down also, with the other attacker raising the club to smash his head.

Mallory picked up the other club and threw it in a blind, desperate attempt to save Terry. The move was partially successful in that the club hit

the man in the ribs, hurting him and drawing his attention away from Terry.

Mallory dived headlong in a football tackle and brought the man down. The latter's head struck the pavement with stunning force. Mallory pulled himself free, grabbed the club and swung it overhand and down—hard.

There was the sound of splintering bone as the man's skull was crushed.

The man with the smashed face had gotten up and was ready to move in again. But now he hesitated, stared wide-eyed at his partner, and took off swiftly into the underbrush.

Terry got slowly to his feet and the three of them stood looking down at the dead body in the road. Mallory said, "Good God! I killed him."

"Don't worry about it," the girl said, dully. "These are deadly times. You have to kill to survive. He would have killed you if he could have."

Mallory dropped the club. "But to smash a man's skull—to meet someone you've never seen before—and kill him. It's—it's the way animals act."

"You saved my life," Terry said.

"Three of them came to our

house," the girl said, "and my father used his shotgun. He killed one of them. The other two ran away."

Terry brushed himself off and rubbed his injured shoulder. "I've got to hand it to you, fella," he said. "You've got what it takes."

Mallory shrugged morosely. "If you mean I can swing a club over my head and kill a man—I guess you're right, but—"

"I mean that we've stepped into a new world and you've landed on your feet. We were headed for Lunar—remember? Violence, disease, sorrow, were not parts of our lives. Now here we are in an animal world—where men have turned into beasts and you know how to handle yourself. I'd have stood there and gotten myself killed. You picked up a club and did some killing of your own."

Then they started walking again. Mallory seemingly unaware of what Terry had been saying, stared straight ahead and muttered, "I wish I could figure it out."

"Figure what out?"

"This stupid disease. People shouldn't have to die this way. It's—it's indecent. It's monstrous that with all our scientific and medical know-

how, that men should drop in their tracks and die."

"They knew about it," Terry said. "The medical men knew the plague was coming and must have tried to find a way to lick it. Otherwise the Lunar project wouldn't have been set up. They found there was no way to stop the green plague."

"I wonder if they really tried."

"What do you mean?"

"A comparatively few people knew this was going to happen. Did the ones in the know try very hard? To lick a thing like this you have to fight with your back to the wall. You must know you *have* to lick it—or else. The doctors who tried didn't have to fight that way because they knew they had an out. And maybe there wasn't enough time to work on the disease."

"Maybe."

Mallory scowled. "You can't tell me there's no cure for the green plague. Why, for every action, there's a reaction. For every weapon, there's a counter weapon—that's why the atom bomb was never used. And for every disease, there's a cure. There's *got* to be."

"You've changed a lot," Terry said, quietly.

"How do you mean?"

"Why, only yesterday—last night—we were in your penthouse looking down on Manhattan. People were dying down there but it meant nothing to you—to either of us—except you were curious to see what was going on."

"I'm still curious. I want to know what this plague is—what makes it kill—how to stop it."

They rounded a bend in the road and saw a car parked off the cement, under a tree. Mallory stopped and stood alert. "Do you think they're friendly?"

Helen said, "I think so. They're probably all dead."

"Then maybe I'll see this disease at last," Mallory said grimly, and hurried down the road.

Helen was right. There were three bodies in the car. A man, a woman, and one child. The man was still behind the wheel of the car. The woman and child were in the back seat. All were dead.

"See?" Helen said. "The sickness turns them a bright green. And notice how limp their bodies are."

"As though the bones had turned to jelly," Mallory muttered. "Very peculiar."

Terry was surprised at how casually Helen took it all.

Then he realized this was because she had seen so much of the green death. He was conscious, for the first time, of how pliable and elastic people are. No matter how great the disaster, they adjust themselves and go on living. Panic, he realized, cannot be sustained indefinitely. He looked at the victims of the tragedy and said, "I guess the decent thing is to bury them—"

Helen said, "We can't. There are too many. The ones we find this way, we just have to leave."

"Here's another child," Mallory called. He'd moved to the other side of the car and they found him kneeling beside the body of an older child, studying it through narrowed eyes. He looked up and said, "Isn't that rather strange?"

"What?"

"This kid got out of the car—why? Notice how he's lying—on his stomach with his face and arms and hands pressed to the ground."

"It's pathetic enough," Mallory said, "but I don't see anything strange about it. He died like the rest."

Mallory kept staring and finally Helen asked, "What do you think is strange about it?"

Mallory got slowly to his feet. "Oh, I don't know. Nothing maybe. It just seemed a little strange to me that—" He stopped talking in that vein and said, "Let's get on to that camp or settlement you spoke of. I want to see what's going on."

Another half mile and Helen led them into a grove filled with tents, cars, and many people. A camp had been set up with the tents flanking a main street.

There was an air of shock and doom about the place that the two men sensed immediately. It would have been apparent even though the observer had not known its cause. The people sat huddled in front of the tents and stared in silence as Helen led Mallory and Terry along the street.

"Waiting to die," Mallory muttered. "Poor devils—sitting around waiting for it to strike them down. There was sobbing and moans of pain coming from the tents, giving unseen evidence of the horror that had been visited upon the people."

As they came to the end of the street, a tall, bearded man stepped from one of the tents and came forward. He took Helen's hand and said, "Child! What's happened?"

Where are John and Vera?"

"They died this morning."

He laid a gentle hand on her arm. "I'm sorry, child—truly sorry."

Helen turned and said, "This is my uncle, Silas Enders. He's a minister. These are some men who saved my life on the road coming here. The car broke down and two other men tried to take me."

Reverend Enders nodded gravely at her companions. "It was good of you. I am grateful."

Mallory said, "I had to kill one of the men." He spoke with careful casualness.

Reverend Enders' eyes were clear and sharp. He said, "If you expect me to be horrified, I'll have to disappoint you. I've seen too much of death and suffering to be concerned over the slaying of a renegade."

"But you have no way of knowing. Perhaps we're renegades ourselves. Perhaps we defended your niece from whim rather than gallantry."

"Perhaps," Reverend Enders smiled, "but you brought her here safely. For that I give you my gratitude and bid you welcome."

"Thank you," Terry said.

"Is this a clinic you've set up here?" Mallory asked.

"No. We have nothing to

offer in the way of cure or medication. There seems to be no cure for this terrible plague. This is just a place where we give dying people whatever comfort we can. They come of their own accord—those who are afraid to die alone. I can do nothing but pray for them and try to give them courage to meet the end bravely."

"You're sure they will all die?"

The minister looked at Mallory with a calm face. "From what has gone before, we must believe they will. Not only they, but we—you and I. None of us is immune. It appears to be just a matter of time."

"That seems a rather defeatist way to look at it," Mallory said sharply.

Reverend Enders asked, "Are you a medical man?"

"No, I'm not. But—"

"Let me commend you for your courage. It is good to have someone face the future with more resentment than fear. Perhaps you will be able to instill a little of it in these people."

At that moment, a plump, motherly woman appeared from one of the tents and hurried toward the group. She glanced at the newcomers,

and the Reverend Enders said, "This is my wife, Jane. She bears a heavy load, here."

Jane Enders acknowledged the introduction with a quick nod, then turned to her husband. "Little Artie Fellers just died and his father is down with the weariness. The mother is almost beside herself. Perhaps you could—"

"I'll go at once," the minister said.

As he left to move down the street of tents, Mallory fell in step beside him. "I'd like to go with you."

"Of course, if you wish."

They entered the tent from which Jane Enders had emerged, to find a child, bearing the deadly green tint, lying dead on a mattress. Nearby, lay a wan-faced man, and seated between them was a woman, crying and swaying from side to side in her grief.

The minister knelt beside her and took her hand. He spoke softly, trying to comfort her. But Mallory paid no attention to the woman. He looked first at the dead child and his face tightened as he noted one small hand had reached off the mattress and clawed up a handful of dirt. He opened the hand slowly and allowed the dirt to fall out. Then, vaguely, his mind

seemingly occupied with something else, he folded the hand and laid it gently on the child's breast.

Now, he turned and centered his attention upon the ailing man. "Are you too tired to talk?" he asked.

"I'm weary—mighty weary, young fellow. Don't think I ever want to move a peg again."

"Did it come on gradually, or did you just suddenly know you were too tired to move?"

"It came kind of sudden-like, I think. Don't rightly recollect. Just too tired for any mortal good."

"Is there anything you'd like?"

"Can't think of nothing except to lie here and rest a bit."

"Are you comfortable?"

"Fair to middling I guess."

"Do you think you'd be more comfortable if we took the mattress away and let you lie on the bare earth?"

The stricken man considered this for a moment before he said, "You know, young fellow, I think you've got something there. I think I'd like that."

"Because it would be more comfortable?"

"Don't rightly know whether it would or not. But I've been craving for some-

thing and didn't rightly know what it was until you mentioned the bare earth. That's be cool. I think that's what I'm craving. Just to lie with my face to good old mother earth—to dig into her—kind of let her hold me to her warm breast."

Mallory's face had lighted up, but there was still a puzzled expression in his eyes as he lifted the man off the pallet and laid him on the ground. Then he watched closely; he heard the sigh of contentment as he saw the man's hands claw at the soil. "Dirt," the man murmured. "Good plain soil."

Then he appeared to drift off to sleep. Mallory sat watching him, unaware that the minister had led the sorrowing mother away. He glanced up when two men came to carry the boy from the tent.

Time passed and he continued to watch the man. Darkness came. He found a lantern, lit it, and set it by the man's head, and continued the vigil.

Finally the man awoke and Mallory noted that the thin hands clawed again at the ground, to dig up handfuls of earth and roll the soil lovingly in his fingers.

"Are you in pain?" Mallory asked.

"Yes. It's beginning to hurt a mite." The man seemed suddenly to realize that Mallory had been with him a long time. He said, "Young fellow, why don't you go and get a little rest yourself? It's been mighty nice of you to set with us, but there's a limit to how considerate folks can be. You've got to watch out for yourself, too."

"It's been nothing—nothing at all. Tell me—is the pain increasing?"

"Getting some worse, all right."

"Where is it the worst?"

"In my chest I think. Pretty bad in my chest."

Mallory bit his lip, thoughtfully. The man said, "Little Artie—he died, didn't he?"

"Yes—maybe it's for the best. He's not suffering any more."

There was pain in the man's eyes. "Young fellow—it's a terrible thing to see your own child sicken and waste and not be able to do nothing about it. A terrible thing."

An hour later, Mallory left the tent and walked slowly down the tent-flanked way. How many, he wondered, had died since he'd entered that place of death. He looked at

his watch by the light of a bright moon and noted it was almost four o'clock in the morning. Enough time for death to strike many times over.

At the Enders' tent, he found Helen, the minister and his wife, and Terry, sitting in a circle around a small oil heater. The minister said, "We were about ready to start looking for you."

"I've been with Mr. Fellers. He just died."

"Poor man," Jane Enders said, "just as well he didn't know his wife died an hour ago. I stayed with her."

"Your friend has been doing a magnificent job," Reverend Enders said. "We finally persuaded him to rest a little."

Mallory looked at Terry, whose face was caked with dirt. Terry rubbed blistered palms together and said, "I'm not much good at comforting people but a little work with a shovel is the least anybody can do."

"He's been digging graves," the minister said. "In one of God's precepts, He instructed us to bury the dead. It is worthy service."

"We have some soup, here," Jane Enders said, "you must be very hungry."

"I have no appetite," Mal-

lory said. Then he turned to Terry. "Let's take a walk."

Terry got wordlessly to his feet and the two men walked out past the tents into the open meadow beyond. They did not speak for a while. Then Mallory said, "We've come a long way in a few hours. From a Park Avenue penthouse to a southern death camp."

Terry said, "If anyone had told me—forty-eight hours ago—that I'd spend this night digging graves for victims of the plague, I'd have—"

Mallory's eyes were turned to the sky. "They're up there, you know, safe on Lunar; far away from this."

"The lucky ones," Terry said, but the true meaning was given by the heavy tone of sarcasm in his voice.

"Cowards," Mallory said, "traitors to their fellow men. Criminals."

"We didn't regard ourselves as criminals when we were of the inner circle," Terry said quietly. "But for a little rocket trouble, we'd be up there now—and we'd resent anyone calling us criminals."

Mallory doubled his fists. "I see what you mean, and I'm probably wrong in calling them names. But when I see the horror down here—the suffering.

"One thing I can say truthfully—I'm glad the rocket went wrong. Come what may, I'll never regret being here and meeting these people."

Terry said, "I'm of the same feeling, except that I can't be complacent about all this. I can't watch them die without resenting it; without feeling anger at the forces that brought on the plague; without being—well, mad at God."

"But God had nothing to do with it. He didn't tell our forefathers to split the atom and contaminate the earth. He didn't preach the fear and hatred that made Mankind cover the world with garbage heaps of deadly refuse."

Mallory's restless mind moved off on another track. "I watched Feller die. I thought for a little while, I had something, but I was wrong." Mallory stopped and gripped Terry's arm. "There must be a cure for this plague! There's got to be!"

"The suffering is terrible to see."

"It's unthinkable that the earth can be depopulated by this horror!"

Mallory began walking again, but Terry remained where he was. Mallory turned and asked, "Are you coming?"

His friend looked at him silently, then said. "No. I'm very tired. Quite suddenly, I want only to lie down and rest. Guess I worked too long in the graveyard."

Mallory came swiftly back and looked into Terry's face. "Of course," he said casually. "You need a little sleep. We'll go back."

He took Terry's arm. The latter accompanied him listlessly, probably not noting the tightness Mallory had striven to hide under his casualness. Certainly not knowing of the fear in Mallory's heart.

Terry had been hit by the plague.

Mallory could not remember when he had slept; nor did he care. He had gone through the period of sleepiness, deep weariness, and had come now, to the stage of dull endurance that sometimes carries men on indefinitely.

He sat in a tent beside where Terry lay; kept constant vigil with the progress of the plague as it tightened its grip. He saw the paleness of skin increase, the pallor take on a dullness, and saw, finally, Terry claw out unconsciously at the dirt beside his mattress.

That means something, Mallory told himself. Why do

they all want to reach for the earth, to lie on it? Is it merely some animal instinct that comes to all men with death close by? He did not think so. He knew that nature is a wonderful intelligent healer of her children. He knew that animals, when faced with death from injury or disease, heal themselves, at times, by doing instinctively what nature tells them to do.

Do men, he wondered, when faced with death, have the same instincts? If so, what clue lay in reaching for a handful of dirt? Should it be eaten? If so, why didn't the stricken put it to their mouths just as dogs instinctively eat grass for certain types of internal sickness?

He gave over his ponderings when hit by a vast sense of inadequacy. Brilliant doctors and chemists and scientists had investigated the green plague and it had beaten them. So what right had he to even grope for a cure? It was absurd—pure presumption!

He had been counting the hours—timing Terry's illness in relation to that of Mr. Feller. And the time came, finally, when Terry's pain should start. Mallory watched him anxiously, stirred him from his stupor of weariness. "How

are you feeling, boy? Still tired?"

"My body is beginning to hurt a little. Not badly, though."

It was the first warning of the end. Soon Terry would be in agony. Then the death would come. Terry closed his eyes. Mallory reached out and took his limp hand and held it tight. Mallory lowered his head.

He prayed.

He prayed for a long time, and as he did so, the natural forces took over; his body demanded rest. He dozed. To awaken with a guilty start. He glanced at his watch and found an hour had passed. He cursed himself.

Mallory could hardly force himself to turn his eyes to where Terry lay on the mattress. When he did, the result was surprise and shock.

Terry's eyes were open. He was obviously conscious and in complete control of his faculties. "I feel better," he said.

"You feel—better?"

"Even the weakness is gone. There was pain for a while. It was pretty sharp. Then it began to diminish and went away completely. I feel guilty lying here. I should be up helping."

"You stay right where you

are," Mallory said. "I'll go and get you something to eat." He rushed from the tent and down the street until he found Reverend Enders turning a bereaved mother over to his wife. Mallory could hardly contain himself. He said, "Reverend—did you ever hear of a person surviving the plague?"

The minister shook his head. "No," he said, sadly. "How is it with your friend? I was just going over to look in on him—but there are so many children—and mothers—"

"He's beaten it. He's come out of it. He was even well into the painful stage—the last stage—then something happened to reverse the disease and he passed the crisis. He's *well*, I tell you! Go see for yourself!"

"It seems impossible!" Reverend Enders muttered. "I hope it could be that we're coming to the end of this awful—"

"How are the others. Are they coming down just as fast?"

The minister's shoulders sagged. "Faster—if that's possible. When you told me the news, I dared hope for a moment, but we have to face reality. There is no ending to the plague. It goes on its

course of depopulating the world."

"How can we be sure?"

"Because it has been established as not springing from life forms. That pitiful little bit, we know—that the plague is not the work of germs, but of radiation poisoning."

"Then why did Terry recover?"

The minister shrugged. "A freak occurrence. A case in ten thousand—maybe more. Why did Mr. Feller die yesterday when your time, or mine, may not come for days or weeks?"

"Perhaps you're right, but I refuse to concede there is no hope."

Reverend Enders smiled. "Then why did the scientists, the doctors, privileged and more fortunate than these, flee this globe and seek sanctuary and safety on Lunar?"

The words startled Mallory. "Then it *was* known by the people?"

"It was not hard to surmise what went on—what was behind the sudden shift in the Lunar Project. Especially when the plague struck and the rockets left the globe in a steady stream."

"The rotten cowards!"

"No, my son. To call them cowards is not fair. Given the

opportunity to escape, you or I might have done exactly the same. The urge for self-preservation is a strong one."

The kindly cleric's eyes were upon Mallory, and the latter saw how keenly they penetrated. Mallory flushed and could not meet the man's gaze.

"You know about us—Terry and I—don't you?"

"It so happens I saw your picture, with your father, in a newspaper not long ago. One of the inner group, so I judged your friend was also."

"You must think I'm quite a hypocrite. Terry and I were headed for Lunar. Our rocket went bad—"

"I prefer to think you came with us through deliberate intent."

The two had been walking up the street of the encampment, Reverend Enders stopping here and there to give a word of sympathy, a smile of encouragement. Now they turned back, just in time to see Jane Enders hurrying toward them.

They ran to meet her, seeing the worst in her eyes. They were not surprised when she said, "Silas—it's Helen. Her time has come."

No word was spoken as they hurried back to the tent. No

word, but in Mallory's heart there arose a great rage that this horrible cruelty could go on and on.

In the tent, they found Helen lying quietly on the ground. She managed a smile. Seeking to comfort them, she said, "It's not bad, really. Just like being very tired after hard work." She looked at Mallory. "As I told you before—it's really not a bad death."

The minister knelt and placed his hand on the girl's forehead. "You have nothing to fear, child. Would that everyone had led as fine and clean a life as you."

Jane Enders cried quietly into her apron.

Mallory ground his teeth.

Helen laid her cheek against the ground. "It's so cool and comforting. The earth. The soil we live on—that supports us."

Mallory saw her slim hands go through that familiar ritual—clutching at the soil, her nails digging it out, the ritual of rubbing it together in her palms.

Somehow seeing this again angered him and he turned away abruptly and left the tent. He almost bumped into Terry as the latter approached. Terry grinned. "I feel wonderful! It's as if I hadn't gotten the sickness at all. I

wonder if it works like some other diseases."

"What do you mean?"

"Once you've had it, you can never get it again."

"No one can say, because you're the first one who ever recovered so far as we know."

"Well I'll be damned! A billion to one shot!"

"Helen's down now."

"Oh, good God, no!"

"And I doubt if she'll be as lucky as you were."

"Poor kid."

Mallory turned suddenly. "You say you feel all right? Strong and all that?"

"Never felt better."

"Then let's get going."

"You want to leave the camp?"

"Yes."

"But why?"

"Because I can't stand it any more," Mallory said savagely. "As long as we can't help, what's the use of hanging around? What good does it do to keep repeating 'Buck up and be of good cheer,' when you know the poor devils haven't got anything to be cheerful about? They're going to die, damn it! So what good's a lot of pious conversation?"

"Okay," Terry said, simply. "Let's go."

Mallory started toward the road in long strides. Terry

called, "Hey—wait. Aren't you going to say good-bye to the Reverend, and to—well, to Helen?"

"To Helen. That's a laugh. 'So long, Helen. We're hitting the road, haven't got time to wait around and see how you look all green!' Come on! Let's get the hell out of here!"

They walked for a long time without speaking, each occupied with his own somber thoughts. There was no sound but the even clicking of their heels on the deserted cement road.

Finally Terry glanced at Mallory and said, "You've been pretty lucky yourself—not being hit with it."

"It'll get us all," Mallory said, bitterly. "You'll be the last human being left on earth."

After a lapse of silence, Terry said, "You think it *was* pure chance that made me recover, Mal?"

"What else?"

"Oh, I don't know. But I was thinking—if I hit the long shot, maybe you can too. What if you didn't get it at all? What if—among all the billions of people on earth, we were the ones who came through—two guys who were supposed to go to Lunar and

didn't make it. Wouldn't that be weird?"

"There aren't any odds long enough to quote on it."

Terry lapsed into gloom. "Well, after all we aren't even sure I won't get it again."

Quite suddenly Mallory stopped. He turned to stare wide-eyed at his companion. "Maybe the odds aren't astronomical at all. Maybe it's the most natural thing in the world that I haven't gotten the plague and that you recovered from it. Come on! We've got to get back."

Mallory began running in the direction from which they had come.

"Hey," Terry called. "What has hit you, man?"

"Come on! There's no time to talk now. Start running and save all your energy."

Mallory did not slow down to wait for his companion. Terry trailed for quite a while, then gradually caught up as curiosity forced him on. "Can't you tell me about it?" he gasped.

"No time—besides I'm not sure. It's just a wild idea."

They had come farther than they'd realized and it was a good hour before they came in sight of the tent city. A few moments later, Mallory burst into the Enders' tent with Terry close behind. Both the

minister and his wife were seated on camp stools beside Helen who was prone on the bare earth.

"How is she?" Mallory asked between heaving gasps.

The Enders' looked up in surprise. "The pain has set in," the minister said. "She was asking for you. We looked everywhere. She wanted to thank you for—"

"No time for that now. Have you got a stretcher?"

"A stretcher?"

"Yes," Mallory barked impatiently. "A stretcher—to carry people on."

"No—no. But—"

"Then we've got to make one. Every minute is important."

He rushed from the tent and came back a few moments later with two stout tree branches. "That blanket," he said, "It's got to be fastened to these poles. Only be quick about it!"

Terry found the twine and Mallory was shaping the stretcher before Reverend Enders had time to speak. Now he asked, "What are you planning to do—move someone?"

"Helen."

"But why—what good—?"

"It's a long shot, but I've got a hunch and I'm going to

follow it through no matter what anyone says."

"My boy—if there is any chance of helping—"

"I think there's a chance. Now, help me get her onto this contraption."

Mystified, both Terry and the minister helped Mallory lift Helen onto the stretcher. Mallory asked, "How do you feel?"

She smiled at him. "The pain is pretty bad, but at least it won't last long."

He laid a hand on her head. "Honey, we're going to take you for a ride. It will be a rough one, so grit your teeth and bear it because we're trying to help—truly we are." He made a mock pass at her chin and smiled. "Okay?"

"Okay—Mallory."

"Good girl." He got up and said, "Grab that end of the stretcher, Terry. And I'd like you to come along, Reverend."

"Of course. But where are we going?"

"To a swamp—to Mogul Swamp—the place our rocket came down."

The minister obviously wanted to ask more questions, but Terry and Mallory had picked up the stretcher and the latter had already started off, so Terry could do nothing but follow along.

The Reverend Enders stood

for a moment, completely at a loss—then he hurried after them.

As he came abreast, Mallory turned his head to ask, "Is it very far? I mean—is there any shortcut through the country? We walked a long time and then came up the road. To tell the truth, I'm not sure I can find the place again."

The minister said, "If Mogul Swamp is what you're after, it's three miles southwest. Leave the road right here and cut through the brush there. You came a roundabout way." He had evidently decided against asking any more questions—possibly because he felt he'd get no answers.

The going was rough and the day was hot. They picked their way through the underbrush, doing their best to make it easy for the suffering girl. Mallory glanced back and asked, "How's it going, honey? Tell me—really—is the pain getting worse?"

"Yes, it's—pretty bad, but—"

"Faster," Mallory said savagely. "I was a fool for not remembering sooner. Now it may be too late even if I am right. Faster."

They began moving at a dog trot, gritting their teeth against the punishment exact-

ed by the heavy load and the hot day. After what seemed endless hours, the edge of Mogul Swamp came into view.

They carried Helen to the brink of the dangerous-looking ooze and set down the stretcher. Terry immediately fell to the ground, exhausted. "I couldn't have gone another step," he gasped.

Mallory said, "You've done fine. I couldn't have asked any more." He dropped to his knees and looked up at the minister. "Now—help me get her clothes off!"

The Reverend Enders scowled. "My boy! Just a minute now. What—"

"We're going to put her in the swamp. Please—quickly—I have a reason and this is no time for modesty and manners."

Dumbfounded, but struck by Mallory's intensity, the minister knelt down and helped strip away the girl's garments. Mallory got to his feet. "Terry—you got to help me. That big limb there—the dead one—help me push it out into the swamp. We've got to have something to keep her from sinking out of sight."

The two men pushed and tugged at the limb until it was out in the ooze. It sank halfway down—then stopped.

Mallory said, "Good—it's shallow enough there so we won't have any trouble." He knelt down and put his arm under Helen's shoulders—lifting her up. "Now, honey—I want you to do something for me. Hold on to that branch and crawl out into the mud. Let it cover you clear up to your neck. We'll be here—we won't let you go under."

Helen was in terrible pain—too much agony to notice that she was naked—and she did not question or resist. Mallory put his hands under her arms and helped her into the swamp, going in himself close behind her; holding her up until he had sunk well below his waist. He said, "There—now hold the branch with both hands and let the mud come up higher—over your breast—up to your neck."

The girl sank in—first fearfully, then gratefully. "It feels good," she murmured. "So cool—"

"That's fine. Now just relax."

She obeyed and after a few moments Terry said, "Now—will you please tell us what this is all about?"

"It's very simple," Mallory said. "You got the plague and recovered. I haven't gotten it. What did we do that no one

else around here did? Our rocket hit in this swamp and we were up to our necks in the stuff."

Terry was still mystified. "All right—you didn't get the plague—but a lot of other people haven't either—yet."

"That's true. Your recovery may have been sheer accident. And maybe I'm slated to get it yet, but there was another thing. I noticed that the victims seemed to have an urge—an instinct, call it what you will—to get close to the ground." Mallory glanced at Terry. "That car we found on the road. Do you remember the little boy? How he got out and lay on the ground as though he wanted it to cover him? Did you notice how victims of the plague almost invariably clawed at the ground and rubbed the soil in their palms?"

Terry looked slightly crestfallen. "No—to tell the truth, I didn't."

"Well, I did, and it bothered me—it haunted me—that single common denominator of all the cases I saw. When Helen got sick she wanted to place her cheek against the ground."

Mallory stopped talking suddenly and seemed to droop as though a reaction from his furious energy had set in. It

seemed also to set in mentally. He said, "Well, that's it. Sounds silly, doesn't it? And it probably is silly. Probably just a fool brain storm. But—"

The Reverend Enders put his hand on Mallory's shoulder as the latter crawled out of the mud after making sure Helen was left supported safely. "I think it's one of the finest things I've ever seen, son. Right or wrong, you tried to do something for others. Your credit cannot be measured by whether your idea works or not. Your desire to help is the true value."

"After we're all dead?" Mallory asked somewhat bitterly. "That will help a lot."

All three men suddenly turned their heads at a sound behind them. They had paid no attention previously, but now they saw that they had been followed. A woman and two men were kneeling in the underbrush within earshot.

The Reverend Enders called, "Come forward. No one will hurt you."

They obeyed slowly, with doubt and wonder in their faces. "You got a cure?" one of the men asked, unbelievably.

"We don't know," the minister said. "It's only an ex-

periment. The chances of it working are very slim."

The three continued to stare for a long moment. Then, as though operated by a puppet master who moved them on one string, they began walking slowly backward.

The minister said, "Please stay with us until we find out. Don't go back until you know for sure. It would be cruel to fill all those people with false hopes."

They did not seem to hear him. Their eyes were on Helen, submerged in the mud. They stared like people transfixed. Then, as one, they broke and ran.

The minister sighed. "They will be here by the score, soon. The whole camp will come."

"I suppose you can't blame them," Terry shrugged. "They—"

He was interrupted by a cry from Mallory. He pointed. The two men looked and saw that Helen's eyes were closed—that a very pale greenish hue was predominant on her set features.

"She's dying!" Mallory gasped, and lunged out into the mud. He grasped Helen's wrist and took her pulse. "No. It's still beating. Helen! Helen! Can you hear me?"

The girl gave no sign. Made no move. Mallory look-

ed helplessly at the minister. "Her heart is strong, but—"

"We can only wait, the Reverend Enders said quietly.

Mallory stayed where he was. Time passed, and none of the three had any way of measuring it. Except that when they looked up again, they were no longer alone. Like silent shadows, the people from the camp had emerged from the woods and had formed a semi-circle around the swamp bank. There were no words spoken as they stood there waiting. The men and the women and the children. People carrying or helping loved ones already in the grip of the disease. Waiting, hoping.

Then, in the tense setting, the miracle happened. So swiftly it was visible to the eye, the greenish tinge on Helen's face melted away. Rich color washed away the horror and resumed its place in her cheeks.

Then Helen opened her eyes. "The pain," she said. "It's gone."

A great cry arose and there was a sudden frenzy of action as everyone began stripping off his clothes and the clothes of those already stricken.

Mallory lunged from the

mud and raised his arms. "Wait! Wait! Don't dive in blind! You'll all be sucked down! Throw in limbs—branches—logs! Something to cling to!"

They heard him and the men began stripping away the trees and bushes and flinging everything they could tear loose into the swamp. Then the people followed.

The Reverend Enders said, "Someone must go immediately and spread the word. Other people must be told of this!"

Mallory took him firmly by the arm. "First you crawl into that mud—you and your wife—and inoculate yourselves. We're not going to have you two drop in your tracks. You're too valuable."

"You're the valuable one," the minister said fervently. "It was a blessed day when you came into our midst."

Helen had been brought from the swamp and a sign of her recovery was the horror with which she regarded her nakedness. But it made little difference, really. Nudity

had become the order of the day.

Mallory and Terry sat on a log and watched the activity. They had seen people seemingly past all hope placed in the life-saving ooze and walk forth cured. Terry said, "It's strange what a man thinks of at a time like this."

"What are you thinking of?"

"That man came up originally from the slime of the sea. He developed great technical knowledge and was pretty proud of himself. He learned how to make a weapon that was his eventual undoing. Now, in the end, he crawls back into the slime of Mother Earth to be healed. The round trip. And he finds he wasn't as smart as he thought."

"You're a philosopher," Mallory said, grinning.

Terry looked at his friend. "You haven't slept for a long time. You must be all in. How do you feel?"

Mallory kept right on grinning. "I feel swell!" he said.

THE END



FACE TO FACE

BY ALBERT MOORE

Granted that Time travel may some day be possible (and there seems to be a lot of otherwise hard-headed guys around who think so), it will have a lot of uses most of us never considered. Take, for instance, clearing up a lot of mysteries whose answers are buried in the long-forgotten past. . . .

LEWIS SELIGMAN shook his head violently. "It was supposed to have been a guarded secret, sir." The scientist was a tall, gray man. He paced the length of his study. He stopped and stared thoughtfully at the man seated in the leather chair. "You

have a purpose, of course?"

"Of course," said Inspector Norman McDermott. "I have a project in mind. I want to go back into the past."

"But that's impossible. My whole idea is to see into the future. I want to know what is before us."

"And I want to go into the past. Curiosity, sir. That is what drives me." The inspector filled a pipe from a leather pouch. "I was assigned to guard your time machine, sir. I and two of my men. That is how I happen to know of the machine. A machine that can take man into the future. But I don't want to go into the future. It is the past that I am interested in. But, mind you, it is only a request. You can refuse me, sir, and there will be no hard feelings."

"Might I know what you seek?" the scientist asked.

The inspector puffed at his pipe. "The identity of Jack the Ripper. Who he was and what he was. I want to know why he killed, why he stopped killing and what happened to him."

"And once you meet him he'll tell you all this. You take too much for granted."

"What if I could stop the killings?"

"Oh, no. You must not interfere with what has already occurred. You cannot change history."

"You will help me?" The inspector leaned forward expectantly.

"But how will I set the machine? What year?"

"1888."

"Exactly where?"

"The Soho district of London."

"I—I cannot."

The inspector put aside his pipe and rose to his feet. He clutched the scientist's upper arms. "The need for knowledge is great in every man. I am a criminologist. I have read everything I could on Jack the Ripper. The records, the old newspapers. But the answers I always sought are not to be found. This is my only chance. To be there when Jack the Ripper strikes. To study him, to find the reasons in his heart . . . if he had one. I know exactly where he will strike and when. I may even prevent his killing his last victims."

"No!" There was alarm sketched on Seligman's face. "You must not tamper with history. I have warned you."

"You mean I am to stand by and watch him kill?"

"Yes."

"All right then. You will let me go?"

"I am afraid. You may not be able to come back."

"I thought the machine was perfected," the inspector said.

"For the future, yes," Seligman said. "I have not experimented with the past."

"Let me take that chance," Inspector McDermott begged.

"But you will be missed at home. Scotland Yard will start making inquiries. An inquisition at this time may bring the machine to light. I cannot have that."

"I can take leave," Inspector McDermott said. "I have time coming to me. There will be no inquiries," he promised.

"It's your neck, Inspector McDermott."

"Let me risk it, sir. It's something I've wanted the most part of my life."

Seligman sighed. "When can you be ready?"

"Tomorrow evening."

"You must not tell this to a soul," Seligman warned.

"There's no need to tell me that," the inspector said.

"And when you come back . . . if you do . . . the secret must still be kept."

"I realize that."

"Tomorrow evening then."

It was raining the next day. It had started early, soaking the city, cleaning it. Rain. The tears of God.

In the laboratory, the two men studied the glass cabinet. "It doesn't seem like much, does it?" Inspector McDermott said.

"A generation went into it," Seligman said.

"It's not a dream that is going to be fulfilled," the inspector said. "It's a desire."

"If you will step into the machine?" the scientist invited.



"Seen my snakeskin belt, mom?"

"Gladly, sir. Gladly."

Inspector McDermott walked into the glass cabinet.

"Remember the spot where you appear," Seligman said. "When your mission is finished return there and stand in the exact spot. I will have the machine working from midnight to one in the morning."

"I understand, sir."

"Now lock the door."

Seligman walked to a panel board set in the side of a wall and turned numerous dials.

Lewis Seligman closed the book. He leaned back in his armchair and gazed at the ceiling. His throat suddenly felt parched. He laid aside the book and went to the liquor cabinet to make himself a gin and bitters.

"I'll have one, thank you," Inspector McDermott said.

The scientist whirled.

The inspector stood in the doorway of the study. "I can use a drink," he said.

"Certainly," Seligman said, and turned to the liquor cabinet. "Were you successful?"

"Very." McDermott advanced into the room. He took his glass and sat down.

"I'm glad you made it," Seligman said. "It's been nearly three weeks."

McDermott finished his drink. "I needed that."

"Tell me." Seligman seated himself. "Tell me. Did you find him?"

"I saw Jack the Ripper kill. But I did not interfere. I saw the knife slash and mutilate. And I saw the Ripper hide in the shadows and then appear and mingle with the crowd. The Ripper was among them. And they never suspected."

"But why did he kill?" Seligman asked.

"The Ripper was mad. Once I knew the identity of the Ripper I checked into the killer's past. A father who drank himself to death and a mother who was insane. That insanity rubbed off on the Ripper."

"But what happened to him?" Seligman asked.

"I killed the Ripper."

"What?"

"I slashed the Ripper to shreds." Inspector McDermott shrugged his shoulders. He picked up his glass and finished the contents. "The Ripper was actually the last victim. When the police found the body they chalked it up to the Ripper's score."

"But that's impossible. The Ripper only killed women."

"I know," Inspector McDermott said. "Jack the Ripper was a woman." **THE END**



COMPROMISE

BY MORT ALYMER

George Scott, who had psychoanalyzed some of Hollywood's more publicized screwballs, had to work very hard at solving the problem of a client who was too happy for his own good!

GEORGE SCOTT, one of Hollywood's most famous psychiatrists, stubbed out his cigarette as Miles Collete entered the office. Scott went to meet and shake hands with Collete in the middle of the room.

"I—I suppose my agent got

in touch with you," Collete said. Miles Collete was a rising young star. He was tall, blond, and knew very little about acting. He was the perfect Hollywood actor.

"I psychoanalyze all of Sherwin Elliot's clients," said Scott.

"There's nothing really bothering me," said Collete. "Mr. Elliot just told me to start making weekly visits to your office."

"This is Hollywood," George Scott said. "One is not considered a star till one has a psychiatrist. It is fashionable these days. Like swimming pools. I suppose you have a swimming pool," Scott supposed.

"Well, no," Collete said, somewhat ashamed.

"No swimming pool! Well, till you get one, I'm afraid you'll have to come in through the back way." Scott sat down in a leather chair, said, "Stretch out on that couch."

Miles Collete stretched.

"At what age did you realize you hated your father?" the psychiatrist asked.

"I never hated my father," Collete corrected his inquisitor.

"Never?"

"Never."

"My boy, you may turn out to be a mental case after all."

"Gosh, I hope not."

"How did you feel toward your mother?"

"Well—"

"Yes?"

"I'd rather not talk about her."

Scott leaned forward, suddenly very interested. "My

boy, I'm here to help you. I'm here to rid you of your psychosis. You don't want to talk about your mother. Why? All your frustration stems from her."

"But I'm not frustrated," Collete protested.

"Don't be difficult," Scott said wearily. "You must cooperate."

"There's really nothing wrong with me."

"Don't tell that to a soul," Scott warned. "Things like that spread around in this town. You want people to go around talking about you behind your back?"

"Why, no, sir."

"How long do you think you'll last here if they find out you're normal? I ask you. How long?"

"Well . . ."

"You'll be back in Ohio so fast your head will swim."

"I was put together in New Jersey. Englewood, New Jersey."

"Well, New Jersey then. What's the— Put together?"

"Yes, sir. Put together. I was created by Professor Hiram Webb. I never had a mother and Professor Webb was the only father I ever knew."

"Come again," Scott said, a bit dazed. "Repeat everything very slowly."

"I was created by Professor—"

"Hold it up. I need a drink. I think you need one too."

"I don't drink."

"Afraid you'll rust?" Scott sneered.

"Oh, no. Nothing like that. I just don't drink."

"Okay. I'll have one myself." Scott fished a bottle and a glass from a drawer in his desk and built himself a hefty one. He tossed it off. "Now what's the gag?" he asked.

"Gag? I don't understand."

"The hell you don't. Is this Elliot's idea? It sounds like something he'd dream up. He needs a psychiatrist more than anybody in Hollywood."

"Oh, I see. You don't believe me."

"That's putting it mildly, old boy."

"Well, it's easy to prove."

"Prove it," Scott urged. "Go ahead. How are you going to do it? Show me."

"Well, I can unscrew my leg."

"How about your head?"

"Oh, no. My head is for real. And so is my brain. That's why I can think for myself."

"Your head is for real? But nothing else is?"

"The professor used the head of a young man who had died in an accident. He kept

the brain alive with a certain solution—"

"Stop!" The psychiatrist waved his arms wildly. "Now you're Frankenstein's monster."

"I'm not a monster," Collete defended himself with indignation. "A robot, if you insist. But not a monster."

"You could be a robot," Scott said. "I saw your last picture."

"You don't believe a word I say," Collete said hotly. He sat up. "I'm leaving."

"All right," Scott said. "You're a robot. For a hundred dollars a visit you can be anything you want."

"What good is it," said Collete, "if you don't believe me?"

"See, I do. In fact, Elliot told me all about it."

"But Mr. Elliot doesn't know. You're just humoring me." Miles Collete pulled up his trouser leg and unscrewed his left leg. "Look inside."

Scott gulped and looked. "Just like the inside of a watch." And then his face blanched.

Collete quickly screwed back his leg and got up. He put his arm around Scott. "Are you all right?"

"I—I don't feel so well."

"Here. Lay down."

Scott lay down on the couch.

"I'll get you some water," Collete said.

"I must be going crazy," Scott murmured.

The robot brought back the water. He helped the psychiatrist rise to a sitting position. Scott drank some water. He sank back.

"Shall I get a doctor?" Collete asked.

"No. I just want to be alone."

"Just as you say."

"My nerves are all shot."

Collete went to the door. "Shall I return next week?"

"If you do," Scott said, "I'll kill myself."

Miles Collete was in his dressing room, waiting to be called to the set for his next scene in *Life's Last Memory* when Sherwin Elliot popped in.

"I just came from the front office," Elliot said. "Your last picture opened in New York yesterday and the reviews just came in. I got

the wires on me. The picture is great. All the papers liked it . . . except the *New York Times*, of course."

"Mr. Elliot."

"Yeah?"

"Is it necessary I have to visit a psychiatrist every week?"

"It's necessary. But we'll have to get you a new one. George Scott is out. For awhile anyway. The poor guy cracked up last night. They picked him up in a bar on Sunset mumbling about robots. He's now under the care of a psychiatrist."

"Mr. Elliot, I'm afraid we'll have to do without any psychiatrists."

"You don't know what you're saying."

"Either that or I quit the movies."

"Okay, okay. Don't get hasty. So you won't have a psychiatrist. But what will people think?"

"I don't care," Collete said. "But I'll compromise. I'll build a swimming pool."

THE END



The Universal Solvent

BY LYSANDER KEMP



The trouble with most scientists is that they need somebody around who can sense danger before it happens!

HE STOOD on the doorstep waving his hands, crying "A triumph, a triumph! A qualified triumph, of course, but a triumph." He was absolutely fizzing with excitement, and when I asked him again to come in, he shook his head vigorously. "A triumph," he

repeated. "You and your wife have got to come and see it."

"I'm sorry," I said, "but Ethel's gone shopping."

"Well, *you* then," he said, and started away. There was nothing I could do but follow.

Professor Gaskell was a re-

tired chemistry professor, an elderly widower who spent most of his time in his basement lab concocting major stinks and minor explosions. Although I was a next-door neighbor I knew him only slightly, but our few encounters had always been cordial. He was even less well acquainted with his other neighbors, and I suppose that is why I turned out to be the observer of his "triumph."

The professor chattered about it confusingly as we crossed the lawn to his house, a round-faced bald-headed little figure who bounced rather than walked, and then led me downstairs into his lab. It was altogether the most astonishing clutter I have ever seen—a dense jungle of retorts and bottles and glass tubing. He guided me busily through the chaos to a contraption in the far corner. Apparently most of the other contraptions led to this, and it was by this that the experiment was completed. I am too much the layman in these matters to describe the device. All I can say is that it was another tangle of glass tubes and receptacles, suspended over a perfectly ordinary washroom sink.

"Now!" said the professor, beaming. "First I shall dem-

onstrate, then I shall explain. Now then!" He began to fiddle with the contraption, and perhaps five minutes passed while he heated this or that liquid and caused this or that powder to dissolve in still another liquid. Finally he cried, "Watch!" although I was watching intently. He held up two small flasks, one in either hand, before my face. The right-hand flask contained a reddish liquid, about the color of terra-cotta. The left contained a whitish liquid.

Then he set them down, took up two medicine droppers, sucked up a little of the reddish fluid into one and a little of the whitish into the other. He dropped a single drop of the reddish into a tiny glass cup suspended over the sink. With great care, and with a steady hand despite his age, he dropped a drop of the whitish squarely onto the reddish. "There!" he exclaimed.

I peered into the little glass cup. It was completely empty. Neither drop remained, the cup contained absolutely nothing. I stared at him in blank astonishment.

"Now I shall explain," he said with a smile. "For five years I have been searching for the universal solvent, the solvent that will dissolve all

known substances. As my search progressed I added more and more equipment, until I finally achieved this magnificent mess." He paused a moment, waving his hand at the artificial jungle that surrounded us.

"But," he continued, "the greatest problem was not to discover the universal solvent, but to discover some sort of container for it. Naturally it would dissolve glass or metal or anything else I put it into. Finally I rigged up this sink. Then, when I succeeded in making a drop of the solvent, I let it fall into running water. By running the water at the same speed as the solvent dissolved it, I kept my sample suspended for experimentation and demonstration. Really I'm quite proud of the idea." He beamed again, and clearly expected praise.

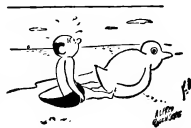
I was much too flabbergasted to praise him, though. I merely blurted, "But Professor Gaskell, the water is no longer running. What happened to that drop of solvent?"

He frowned, and I felt that I had interrupted his narrative—that he wanted to hurry on and tell me how he sought the solvent, and finally came up, not with what he sought,

but with two liquids that obliterated each other. Which, of course, was pretty wonderful in itself, at least to a layman.

But the frown was only momentary, and he continued. "Good question, very good. But I figured that out. After demonstrating the properties of the drop, I simply let it go. It has dissolved itself straight to the center of the earth. Nothing could stop it, so of course it has moved to the center of gravity. Once there, it became perfectly harmless. It can't escape from the center, therefore it can't reach anything else to dissolve."

I hated to interrupt again, but I had another question.



"The Lord knows," I said, "that I am no geologist"—and the professor nodded and said, "Nor I"—"but it seems to me there must be great pressure at the center of the earth, everything pushing toward it. I should think that the outer stuff would keep pushing the inner stuff into that drop. Won't that one drop," I asked, smiling at my little joke, "dissolve the whole world away?"

To my utter amazement, Professor Gaskell turned the color of an oyster. His eyes grew wide and glassy, and he seemed to be choking. For a moment he was on the verge of collapse.

When he got his breath back he said in a low, strained voice, "You're right. I never thought of it. I have destroyed the earth. Think of it, I have murdered all mankind!"

He said this with such obvious conviction and horror, I thought he must be momentarily unhinged. "Well," I replied in a breezy voice, to snap him out of it, "you don't have to be quite so upset, since the experiment obvious-

ly didn't work."

"But it *did* work!" he shouted. "That's why you staggered me. I *made* the universal solvent!"

"Come, now," I scoffed, "I saw the experiment fail. I saw the drops turn each other into gas or whatever it was."

"No, I made it!" he shouted again, gesturing toward the glass cup. "Can't you realize that you *saw* me make it?"

I gaped at him. "You mean to say . . ."

"Yes, yes. It is, you realize, a *universal* solvent."

I nodded, my mind swirling.

"It will dissolve *anything*."

I nodded once again.

"It will dissolve *everything*."

I nodded violently.

He dropped into a chair, his face ashen. He was unable to speak further.

Nor could I. I turned and walked out of there, back to my apartment, to my desk. I got out pencil and paper and began to figure.

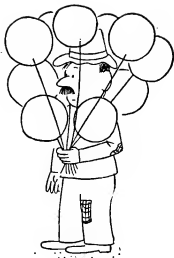
In the four days since then I've used up two reams of paper. I have it all calculated, but I'm not sure I'm right.

Anyone for mathematics?

THE END

LITTLE FORRIE . . .

1.



2.



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